

**Mark 3:20-35**

3:20 and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.

3:21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."

3:22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

3:23 And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

3:24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

3:25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.

3:26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

3:27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

3:28 "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter;

3:29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"--

3:30 for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

3:31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.

3:32 A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you."

3:33 And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

3:34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!

3:35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

#### SERMON:

It's Graduation Sunday, a day when we look back with fondness on the people and the places that have shaped us, and through the eyes of our graduates we exude hope for the world that will be.

So...it's only fitting that we should read a Gospel text with violent, apocalyptic, divisive imagery – one that opines about unforgivable sin, and challenges our assumptions of family systems, right?!? Sometimes, when we spin the lectionary wheel, it doesn't always land on the most ideal passage.

But Aaron and Julia, maybe that's fitting for today. Because each of you are about to embark on a four-year adventure, and really a lifetime of adventure, where the text won't always print just what you want to read, and people won't always preach just what you want to hear, and

artists won't always paint the picture you hoped to see. But as you begin to refine and sharpen your philosophy, and your politics, and your theology, and your outlook on life, there is a remarkable opportunity: you get the chance to begin interacting with people, places, and ideas. In people, places, and ideas, you have the chance to search for deeper meaning, and for common ground, even in spaces of disagreement, and doubt, and division. And you have a chance to discover holiness in the people, places, and ideas you never imagined possible.

So... let me throw something at you. If you read today's text out of context, you might see Jesus as someone who's drawing a dividing line between the righteous and the unrighteous in the same way we see politicians operating in our own time. Jesus is saying either you are on my team or you aren't. And you may read Jesus as someone throwing serious shade at his siblings. And you may hear that phrase *unforgivable sin*, and you may wonder what it is that somebody must do to be SO cut off from God.

But...but...but... if you were to read the two chapters that precede this text, you'd hear about a person named Jesus, who is so tapped into, and so filled up with God's presence, that he is literally bringing God's realm into the present. Jesus is healing, and feeding, and caring for others; and Jesus is interpreting and sharing scriptures in an illuminating way; and Jesus is helping to create a sense of connectedness the likes of which his communities have never known.

And nobody, I mean nobody – not the town leaders, not the local clergy, not his high school English teacher, not his Little League baseball coach, not his best friend from grade school, not the little old lady whose lawn he used to mow, not even his mama, or his brothers, or his

sisters – none of them, not one single person, can believe what God has put Jesus up to.

“No way,” they say, “God doesn’t work like that, and God most especially doesn’t work through people as ordinary as you and me. You must be possessed, you must not feel well, you must let us look out for your welfare.”

The town leaders don’t want Jesus to be Messiah, because they are in charge. And his peers don’t want it either, because when you’re down and out, misery loves company. And Jesus’ family doesn’t want him to get hurt, or better yet, get them hurt in the process. And so the communities of Jesus, the ones he was most connected to, they don’t or won’t believe.

What does Jesus do? Jesus offers a very strong speech, or at the least the writer of Mark puts very strong language on the lips of Jesus. Here’s how I read what Jesus says. I believe he’s telling us that God is here, right now, in our midst. And Jesus uses a phrase: “unforgivable sin.” I’d call it alienation or disconnectedness from God. And Jesus says, “You wanna know what’s the one thing you can do to be disconnected from or shut off from God? It’s to believe that God’s spirit is incapable of filling up, of empowering, of transforming anybody and anything in any place and any time.”

All our lives, we’ve been taught to value the importance of relationships. Both of you, Aaron and Julia, are where you are today, because your parents, and your teachers, and your community leaders, and your family members, and your friends, and your church family have been essential in your formation. Jesus is not dismissing the value and importance of these relationships. Jesus is simply saying that God is our center. And when we are filled with God’s spirit, we become bound

up in something greater than kinship, greater than societal labels, greater than common familiarities. When we follow the will of God, we are family to one another. And occasionally, there will be times when the will of God, and the things that God calls us to do, will put us at odds with those with whom we are bound to.

For Jesus, this happens a lot. But take note. Yes, 100%, undeniably, his language appears harsh in this morning's text. But nowhere in this text, nowhere, does Jesus assert that anyone in his community, not even his enemies – NO PERSON – is incapable of believing in or of being empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus believes in the ability of every person to be transformed. And he doesn't just believe it, he tells us that God longs for, roots for, continuously works for such a possibility. And Jesus believes that our connection to one another in God can transcend every relationship.

Aaron and Julia, we, your church family love you, and we are proud of you, and the world is most definitely a better place for who you are, and what you bring to everyone around you.

I, and I dare say, we, are envious of you both – envious of the amazing download of knowledge, adventure, and umph that await you in the season ahead. None of us here can offer you specific details about what your collegiate journey has in store. But we can tell you with certainty that the years ahead will introduce you to people, places, and ideas that will shape and sharpen your core expressions

Pretty soon, you are going to begin engaging with a whole host of people who will see the world in different ways than you. The entire world is represented on your campuses. Between your two esteemed universities, there are more than fifty thousand students engaged in more than 250 majors, not to mention hundreds of graduate programs.

They represent all 100 North Carolina counties, 39 states, and 38 countries.

Many of these people have no earthly idea how to pronounce Appalachia. App-a-lay-shen? Appa-la-SHAME on you!!! Too many of them believe that barbeque is a verb. And thousands more will insist that it's no big deal to drive on icy roads. They have much to learn about our region!

But guess what? They also have much to teach you. They too bring a wealth of knowledge you have not yet discovered: new cuisines, new artists, new communities, new places to add to your heart.

Odds are, you'll like some of what they say, and you'll probably despise some of what they say, too. And you'll begin to form your opinions about this world, and you'll begin to cling to the ideas at your very core. And when you come back at Christmas break, we'll enjoy hearing what you've learned.

I am reminded this morning of one of the great thinkers my studies introduced me to more than a quarter century ago, Karen Armstrong, and particularly a quote from her book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. Armstrong writes:

We can either emphasize those aspects of our traditions, religious or secular, that speak of hatred, exclusion, or suspicion, or work with those that stress the interdependence and equality of all human beings. The choice is ours.

I'm oversimplifying her words, but Armstrong reminds us that compassion is a choice, and a lived discipline. And empathy, for her, is

**A Spirited Future**

**Bob Stillerman**

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really the ability to have an awareness of the many ecosystems that we occupy. We must recognize that we don't live in a vacuum. And we should work to treat others the way we would want to be treated.

Armstrong also argues that the Golden Rule is the essential component of every major religion, and yet the structures of our world religions have a history, and a long one at that, of doing the very things that are contrary to the Golden Rule.

I hope, we hope, more than anything, that wherever, and whatever, and to whomever you are called, that you will be guided by a spirit of empathy, compassion, and curiosity for the world around you.

I also hope, we also hope, you will remember that you are rooted in this place, and you are rooted in God. But should you ever need a reminder, we encourage you to look for a table. In your home, in the cafeteria, in the classroom building, in any place, of any makeshift variety. For at the table, historians may disagree, and theologians may argue different perspectives, and clinicians may advocate different techniques, and fans may root for opposing teams, and we may come clinging to identities bound up in family, or citizenship, or place, or something else.

But when we break the bread, and when we drink the cup, we are reminded of a God who transcends people and places and ideas. And we are reminded of a God who connects us, restores us, empowers us, welcomes us, and longs for us. And we are reminded that it can happen right now, right here, among those whom we love. And even among those with whom we struggle to love. Especially among those with whom we struggle to love.

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.