

A House Divided: Discerning Beelzebub

Mark 3: 19a-30

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 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. “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Perhaps you've heard that pop sensation, Taylor Swift, and Kansas City Chief's football star, Travis Kelce, are engaged to be married. Soon after their announcement went public, public opinion weighed in. There was even a televangelist from Arkansas who gave his interpretation: saying that the couple's marriage has been engineered by Satan so Taylor Swift can one day give birth to the antichrist and launch the apocalyptic thousand-year war against Christians. (Seriously, must Taylor Swift do everything?) Leave it to religious extremists to interpret what is actually a good thing as an evil thing. While more than likely interpreting what is actually an evil thing as something that is good. It's not new. Jesus is in the public forum, when he encounters some religious folk who have interpreted what he is doing as evil. So the gospel sets out to clarify what is truly of God, and what isn't. Is Jesus out of this world, or is he out of his mind?

We have a lot of ground to cover here, so let's get started. Jesus has been healing bunches of people, casting out demons. So the rumor mill starts muttering. Jesus is not easy to categorize. He's clearly shaking things up. Challenging where the power cells have clustered. So the religious leaders, not knowing what to do with Jesus, demonize him. “Beelzebub and The prince of demons,” they call him. Like demonizing trans folks. Like demonizing immigrants. Like demonizing one outsider or another. Notice how they spin the narrative into a conspiracy theory just to fit their own bias. “Clearly,” they say, “Jesus is trying to fool us. He's only casting out these demons, pretending it is a good thing, while *really he's the prince of demons in disguise!*” They are interpreting Jesus' healing as a negative thing. We've been there too. Like in the 90's when you all said, “we are going to be affirming for everyone.” You were suddenly put under the heat lamp—people pointed at you and said things about your ministry. These days, we get letters in the mail and words messaged on social media for hanging our BLM banner. They interpret our offerings of healing as divisive and racist against white people. So when people start interpreting what we are doing as a negative, or divisive thing, we stand in the company with the Lord.

So listen to how Jesus responds. He makes an appeal to reason—bless his heart. He uses an argument of logic. How can evil cast itself out? If evil tries to cast out evil, it will be according to

how evil functions. So, in fact, evil won't be casting out evil at all. It will be doubling it. If violence tries to cast out violence, it will be according to ways of violence, which only makes the situation twice as violent. Jesus says, we aren't talking about division here. We are talking about multiplication. If we try to solve a problem with the same mentality which created the problem in the first place we are only going to double the problem. It's why guns stopping guns, or bombs stopping bombs doesn't make sense. It's why cancelling someone who has canceled us leaves us more divided rather than less. Because it multiplies the animosity, it reinforces our way of thinking about others. Jesus appeals to reason, as least at first.

Then to drive the point home he does something brilliant: he subtly reinterprets their own story. You see, the name Beelzebul is intentional. It means, "Lord of the flies." It's a reference to the plagues in Egypt, when the flies covered the crops and destroyed the land. So Jesus plays along. He says "let's talk about Egypt—a kingdom divided that could not stand." Remember Aaron and Moses? How they would perform a plague? And then Pharaoh calls his magician people and what do they do? They perform the same plague. Moses and Aaron turn the Nile River into blood. The magicians do the same. It culminates with a plague of frogs who get sick and die. The whole land smells of dead frogs. Now, if Pharaoh actually cared about people, he would have ordered the magicians to take away the plagues. But instead, he was in rivalry with the power of God and so he doubled the problem—he divided the kingdom—because a kingdom divided against itself actually does away with itself just as Pharaoh did in Egypt.

So Jesus is saying, if it's a satanic project then there will be in fighting. It will be in rivalry with the power of God by multiplying the problem, not healing it. It will be turning on itself in non-sensical ways. Like that house representative from Florida—a Black man—who claimed the Jim Crow Era was a good time for Black people because the Black family was together, while saying it was the civil rights movement which is to blame for the erosion of family values. Huh? Jesus appeals to reason, to logic, and even to their own history, showing how to interpret what truly is the power of God, and what truly is the nature of evil. Pretty brilliant, right?

But hold on! Here comes the key. Jesus says he is going to bind up the strong man. The strong man of white supremacy. The strong man of anti-LGBTQ. The strong man of toxic masculinity. The strong man of war against the innocent. The strong man of Christian nationalism. He's going to bind it up all, and tie it all together and then...he is going to forgive it. All of it. All of the hatred. All of the violence. All that is done in the name of God, which has absolutely nothing to do with God at all. All of it can be forgiven.

Except one thing: there is one eternal sin—which leaves us hopeless. There is one thing not even God can do anything about: blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Well, what's that so we don't do it!? You see, we blaspheme the Holy Spirit by refusing to see that everyone—everyone!—is forgiven and included in the good news. All the Pharaohs throughout history—who claimed to be the strong man. All they have done, by the grace of God can be forgiven. But here's the problem: they have refused to participate in the ways of forgiveness—thus making it impossible to receive forgiveness and share it. They have continued to be in rivalry with God's power of forgiveness. Their hearts have remained so hard, that the Holy Spirit cannot do anything with those who refuse to be forgiven—then, and only then, is all hope lost.

Forgiveness is the key. Forgiveness is that which is to be multiplied. Forgiveness is the power of God and the kingdom cannot stand—the world cannot stand—without it.

A few years back, you might remember that a self-proclaimed “strong man” leader of our country interrupted a church service. The secret service escorted this person up front, and the leader asked the pastor to pray for him. After the incident people, as they do, started to talk and critique what the pastor prayed. Now I’ve fantasized about what I would say if I were the pastor in the situation. And after reading the gospel this time around I think I’d pray: “Loving God, break his heart so that he may be open to forgiveness.” For a people divided cannot stand. A people without forgiveness will never know the power of God’s love. And those who refuse will never know the difference between what is of God, and what is evil. “Loving God, break our hearts, so that we may all be open to forgiveness. So your kingdom might stand, before all hope is lost.” Amen.