

As we continue our summer preaching series based on Will Willimon's book, *Why Jesus?*, I am choosing a different word from Willimon today to describe Jesus. While Willimon describes Jesus as a "Homewrecker," I respectfully disagree and believe that this description of Jesus, while somewhat true, was/is not Jesus' intention. Though it is mentioned several times in scripture, Jesus did not come to tear apart families. Yes, Jesus reconfigures but does not entirely reject aspects of family. Yes, it still happens where families break up over religion. All this to say, instead, I chose to use the descriptive word "Leader" to describe Jesus. I tested this out this past Wednesday morning in Bible Study. I really thank the Bible Study for helping me to pray/think through this text. I was reminded that while Jesus doesn't need my protection, I know that misinterpretation of scripture and of Jesus is real. For example, I heard someone say the other day that Jesus was a Christian and not Jewish. That is incorrect and doesn't make you any less a Christian to say this. Jesus was a Jew. Jesus couldn't have been a Christian for many reasons. The biggest of which is that Christ is the reason Christians are called Christians. Personally- due to negative connotations associated with the word "Christian," I prefer to be called a follower of Jesus. Many of us choose to follow Jesus because Jesus is not only our Lord and Savior but also a guide for how we're to conduct ourselves and to live. Jesus is a Leader, and we're his followers. Jesus was a brown skinned Middle Eastern Jewish man, and he very much lived in this context. According to the Gospel of Mark, after being tempted in the wilderness by Satan for 40 days, Jesus begins his ministry by calling James and John and asking them to "follow him, and he will make them fish for people" (1: 16-17) and then Jesus performs an exorcism in a synagogue on the sabbath. Then he heals Simon's mother-in-law, who was ill with a fever; he cured many who

were sick and cast out many demons; he healed a man with leprosy and soon everyone from everywhere were coming to Jesus to be healed. He healed a paralytic and also offered forgiveness for sins. One could say that Jesus was causing quite the stir- crossing many boundaries. He was the talk of not one but many towns. The religious authorities were fed up with Jesus because he was effectively undermining their power and influence. Jesus rebuffs religious custom and marches to the beat of his own drum. And what a leader he is! What kind of example is he setting for his followers? His disciples don't fast; they pluck grain- a form of work- as they walk along a field on the sabbath. Then Jesus heals again on another sabbath. The man with the withered hand. That's where Chapter 3 of Mark's Gospel begins. We're told that whenever the unclean spirits saw Jesus that they fell down and shouted, "You are the Son of God" (3:5). It's just Chapter 3, and Jesus has somehow managed to offend many and capture others. After appointing the twelve disciples, Jesus sends them out giving them authority to cast out demons. Jesus then goes back home to Nazareth, which is the setting of today's text. Even before Jesus and his family have a moment to share a meal together, the crowds show up at the door. Then Jesus has an argument with this family and invites the growing, rambunctious crowd in. Now his household is offended, and they try to restrain Jesus, saying to one another, "He has gone out of his mind" (3:21). They weren't the only ones who thought Jesus was off his rocker. Some of the religious authorities were sent from Jerusalem around this same time and arrived in Nazareth to investigate this radical, out of control rabbi, whose reputation far preceded him. Upon their observations, they also determined that he had gone coo coo for cocoa puffs- muy loco. This group of religious leaders or scribes even accused Jesus of having a demon in him in order

to describe his power- and not just any demon- but the ruler of demons- Beelzebul also known as Satan. The scribes, who represented the religious power center, and Jesus' family are unsettled by Jesus' ministry. Can you tell? Mark doesn't tell us how Jesus responded to this ludicrous claim. Can you imagine having not only your colleagues and mentors but also your family turn on you?! But before we act all surprised, let's be real for a moment. When have we- "for the sake of familial and religious order" tried to detain Jesus? We shouldn't be surprised by their response. Jesus wasn't. He was prepared with a parable. And after his parable is where we pick up this morning in Mark's Gospel, which picks back up the thread involving Jesus' family from v. 21. But before we turn to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Can you explain Jesus' behavior here?! It is quite upsetting at first when I read and hear these words. Instead of going out of his way to greet and reassure his mother and siblings, Jesus rejects their interventions, renounces their claims on his life and trades them in for a new family of his own making (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). Jesus' family nor the scribes are inherently evil. They're just trying to keep the peace. Haven't we all done that before? They're not out to thwart God; they just want to keep things respectable- you know decently and in order. When one first reads today's text, I can see where you may walk away thinking Jesus is a homewrecker- if this is all you read without the context. I mean here we seem to find a Jesus who scandalizes his hometown by accusing his religious leaders of blasphemy and publicly disowning his mother and siblings. "Let's get the obvious over first: if you need Jesus to be soft and cuddly, this scripture passage is not for you. If you need to affirm your sense of order, your

personal and social boundaries, and your spiritual comfort zones, this scripture passage isn't for you. If you need Jesus to make your life decisions less painful and costly, this scripture passage is definitely not for you" (Thomas).

Perhaps Jesus knew something that we don't know or have forgotten and need to know or be reminded? *There is something in us that often prefers to 'demonize' God's work in the world, instead of experiencing and embracing God's redemption, liberation, and healing.* This is tough to hear and tough to acknowledge. There is something in us that resists the work of God in the world, pushes it away- especially when the work or will of God is a threat to our authority or autonomy, when it's a threat to our power or privilege, when we have something to lose. Just watch what happens when anyone tries to take on the oppressive powers, watch them swarm over you like flies. That, essentially, is what these exorcism stories are all about in the Gospels, especially in Mark: *liberation from oppressive powers.* The kingdom of God that Jesus came to proclaim and embody was and is about liberation from oppressive powers, by an even greater power" (*On the Way [blog](#)*). That's why as followers of Jesus we participate in the work of justice. Jesus came to disassemble systems of oppression and that made people- scribes, his family, Roman authorities- nervous, threatened, uncomfortable.

Can you picture this scene? Notice who is on the outside and who is on the inside. "Outside the house stand the insiders- the family, the religious folk, the pious, the careful. They think they have God pinned down. They know what the Holy Spirit is supposed to look like, and Jesus doesn't fit the bill. Inside the house sit the

outsiders- the misfits, the rejects, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. They're not interested in dogma or piety; they just need love and they seem to have found it in a man who heals the sick and feeds the hungry. And in the midst of them? Smack in the center of the sick, the insane, the deviant, the hungry, the unorthodox, and the unwashed? There sits Jesus, saying, 'This. This is my family'" (Thomas). Jesus isn't calling for surface change here; he's dividing the house. Outside is in and inside is out. Let's be careful with our certainties. I have to say that as a mom, I would be ticked and hurt if my child renounced me. But what if this moment of breakage and rupture costs Jesus something dear as well?! I'm sure Jesus knows the agony of letting his mother go. "But he also knows that he's God's Son first, and that his divine legacy must trump all others. Still. I hope that it's with a secret lump in his throat that he bids his family goodbye" (Thomas). At the same time, I can't help but imagine what it must have been like to have been sitting around Jesus that day- learning from him- soaking up the good news like a sponge. I think we all know intimately well the hunger to belong, to have someone safe and loving to belong to. That's what Jesus does for the crowd that day- he invites them in, asks them to stay, and he makes them family.

Let's give the scribes and Jesus' family the benefit of the doubt. If I'm honest, I've been there as well. They all may have wanted, more than anything, to do God's will. So may we, in pew and in pulpit. The trap ever before us is to define the kingdom's boundaries and expect God to abide by our beliefs (C. Clifton Black, WP). As we all know, we are not God. I want to be more like Jesus in my heart. Don't you? "Yes, Jesus divides the house, and that process hurts. But he doesn't divide it to make us homeless. He divides it to rebuild it. To make it more

spacious, more welcoming, and more beautiful” (Thomas). Kinship is based, not on blood, but on doing God’s will (v. 35). Jesus says, “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (v. 35). Did you notice that he added “sister” there? Jesus, regardless of threats to his identity, is not about to have his mission and vocation undermined, hence his deft, bold steps to take back the story. “What does one have to do to do the will of God or to be credibly called a Christian, a contemporary follower of Christ?” I think of a story I read this week of two hospital chaplains who lost their job defending a colleague, a Muslim imam, was detained by ICE. Both chaplains, one of whom had worked at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital for ten years, were fired after speaking out and attending a silent prayer vigil for their colleague that turned violent. I don’t know all the details. All I know is what I read in multiple sources. ([link](#), [link](#)), and I can tell you my first thoughts were, “Would I have been this faithful to follow Jesus?” and “Dang! This is the cost of discipleship!”

What does one have to do to do the will of God or to be credibly called a Christian, a contemporary follower of Christ?” Willimon answers, “You must be willing to be baptized, to be adopted by a new, far-flung, barrier-breaking family, the church. You must be disposed to let go of your innate American rugged individualism and be subsumed in a family bigger and more demanding than the one into which you were born. You must join us at the table, addressing some of the most sinful, often difficult-to-bear rascals as ‘brother’ or ‘sister,’ just because Jesus loves them to death.” It’s all that easy and it’s all that hard to follow Jesus, isn’t it? The challenge is like Anne Lamott says, “You can safely assume that you have created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the

same people you do.” Is it God’s will or our will? “When we confuse the two, we stand in the way of God’s ongoing redemptive work to save, to heal, to liberate God’s children, to liberate humanity. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and who are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware of those who cannot tell God’s will from their own” (*Bread and Wine*). For those in today’s story and for us today, the question remains: is Jesus a leader worth following, especially when it means making him the #1 priority in your life? Friends, as those who claim to follow Jesus, we’re always asked to choose sides. Are we aligned with God’s purposes? Are we siblings of Jesus seeking after God’s will, doing God’s will? Or are we, unknowingly, buddies of Beelzebul? We have a choice: to live on the lunatic fringe in the upside down kingdom of God or to support the status quo with its predictably oppressive consequences. Whose side are we on” (*On the Way*, blog)? As I asked those attending Wednesday morning Bible Study, what stands in your way of following Christ? Jesus, as Leader, asks us to follow him and to do God’s will. Are you with him or not? Amen.

Let us pray a prayer from the late preacher Howard Thurman (*Meditations of the Heart*). *Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart. Here is the citadel of all my desiring, where my hopes are born and all the deep resolutions of my spirit take wings. In this center, my fears are nourished, and all my hates are nurtured. Here my loves are cherished, and all the deep hungers of my spirit are honored without quivering and without shock. In my heart, above all else, let thy love and integrity envelop me until my love is perfected and the last vestige of my desiring is no longer in conflict with thy Spirit. Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart. Amen.*