

Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring  
Third Sunday after Pentecost  
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## **Surprising Forgiveness**

Mark 3:20-35

I have two serious topics to speak on today. But I doubt any sermon in any church in Washington is happening without a shout-out to the Capitals. So, here's mine: God saves us all, but nobody else saves more than Braden Holtby! Better than 92%. Woof. Go Caps!

But that's not the focus of today's sermon.

What I talk about today is the Gospel reading. Mark, Chapter 3. And it's an often-misunderstood passage, and for that reason controversial. But I don't want to go over the whole text. I just want to talk about two ideas.

First idea: when you or I begin to do what God wants us to, people will be confused. Even your loved ones.

In the reading in Mark, Jesus has begun his ministry. And his family has been getting some serious negative blowback. We read: "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."<sup>1</sup>

Second idea: one of the most radical things God commands us to do is to forgive one another. And when you start to do that, to forgive someone else—brace yourself. People will react. Even your family may be confused.

Here is a quick personal story about how I freaked out someone who used to know me well when I started to talk about how God guides me today.

A few months ago, the mother of my high-school girlfriend died. My high-school romance was not casual—I thought we might get married. But we went to different colleges, and the romance ended. I was, however, good friends with the family, although we did not really keep in touch.

But my ex-girl-friend's family knew a very different Wade. One who was an avowed atheist. Someone who thought religion was evil.

So, I spent most of my time during the funeral reception explaining who I am now. How I regained my belief. Joined Holy Cross. Found my wife Mary. How I graduated from Education for Ministry and now love teaching it.

My ex-girl-friend and her family, who had known me so well 45 years ago, looked at me and asked, "What happened to you?"

And that, I suggest, is exactly what is happening to Jesus in Mark Chapter 3.

It will help to remember what happened to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark right before today's reading. He begins to perform miracles, so that those who witness can believe in him.<sup>2</sup> And this really threatens the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 3: 21.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:32-35 (many healed after Sabbath sunset); Mark 1:40-45 (cleanses a leper); Mark 2:1-12 (heals a paralytic); Mark 2:13-17 (eats with tax collectors); Mark 3:1-5 (again healing on the Sabbath).

Jewish temple leaders, and they begin to try to discredit the miracles.<sup>3</sup> They go so far as to suggest that his miracles are performed not by God but by Satan.<sup>4</sup>

Mark Chapter 3 picks up that narrative. Jesus has probably returned to his home in Capernaum, where, according to contemporary scholarship, his family has moved from Nazareth.

Jesus' hometown neighbors know that his mission and preaching have begun. And they are upset. Even his family. They want him to be quiet. To stop unsettling people. A mob has formed outside his family's house. The religious authorities, and so also the political leaders, are stirred up.

In today's reading Jesus recognizes explicitly the tension between how he is calling us to act and our human nature. "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand."<sup>5</sup>

So, I am pretty sure that one important point of today's reading is the idea I started with, and it is a big one: following God is going to change how you behave. And when that happens — when it does change how you behave — be prepared for people you have known for a long time to say, "What happened to you?"

Think about the times recently when God guided you to do something that surprised people who know you well.

- Maybe you bought items at the store because you knew the Church Outreach basket needed them.
- Maybe you were inspired to pray for someone who got well.
- Maybe today you stopped and spoke with the homeless person in the parking lot and gave him one of the Holy Cross comfort kits.

Here is the point: did you tell anyone why you did what you did?

If so, you may well have gotten a strange look. Because in contemporary society, believing in God, and acting on that belief, is spooky.

Which brings us back to Mark chapter 3 and what it talks about at its end, something we have a hard time dealing with today: forgiveness.

Here is the connecting idea: one of the hardest things to understand about Christians, and acting as God wants us to act, is the commandment to forgive those who trespass against us.

As Mark 3 demonstrates, forgiveness is such a radical idea that when we practice it, it will make us seem strange to others.

Yet in Mark 3, Jesus is also explaining to us why forgiveness is profoundly important. Jesus assures us that we will be forgiven everything—everything—except if we cannot believe in the Holy Spirit. That's what Jesus is talking about at the end of the reading: Mark 3: 35: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Well, if the past few weeks don't provide some meat on forgiveness as a sermon topic, nothing will.

Let's take stock:

A television star makes a racist slur. Another television star uses an unprintable insult to refer to another woman.

I condemn both statements.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 3:6.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:22.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 3:24.

Both statements were awful.

Really, really, awful.

But... both people who made the statements have apologized.

What would it take, for us, woke people of Christ, to forgive them, and to say we forgive them?

And if we said to others that we have forgiven them, would we get the same skeptical looks that Jesus got from his neighbors?

Would we get the same urgent questions from our family, concerned that our weird ideas might get their car torched?

But, if we can't do the right thing, if we can't forgive those who trespass against us, aren't we ourselves then rejecting the gift of the Holy Spirit?

And isn't that what Jesus says is the only really unforgivable sin?

So, I leave you today with two thoughts.

The first is, once you begin to act as Christ intends, get ready for some surprised reactions.

Second, why not make it a point this week to really surprise someone by practicing radical forgiveness?

Amen.