

Mark 3:20-35 (NRSV)

²⁰and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." ²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."²³ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷But 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.

²⁸"Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— ³⁰for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

The True Kindred of Jesus

³¹Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters^[a] are outside, asking for you."³³ And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Message

Mark 3:20-35 The Message (MSG)

²⁰⁻²¹ Jesus came home and, as usual, a crowd gathered—so many making demands on him that there wasn't even time to eat. His friends heard what was going on and went to rescue him, by force if necessary. They suspected he was getting carried away with himself.

²²⁻²⁷ The religion scholars from Jerusalem came down spreading rumors that he was working black magic, using devil tricks to impress them with spiritual power. Jesus confronted their slander with a story: "Does it make sense to send a devil to catch a devil, to use Satan to get rid of Satan? A constantly squabbling family disintegrates. If Satan were fighting Satan, there soon wouldn't be any Satan left. Do you think it's possible in broad daylight to enter the house of an awake, able-bodied man, and walk off with his possessions unless you tie him up first? Tie him up, though, and you can clean him out.

²⁸⁻³⁰ "Listen to this carefully. I'm warning you. There's nothing done or said that can't be forgiven. But if you persist in your slanders against God's Holy Spirit, you are repudiating the very One who forgives, sawing off the branch on which you're sitting, severing by your own perversity all connection with the One who forgives." He gave this warning because they were accusing him of being in league with Evil.

Jesus' Mother and Brothers

³¹⁻³² Just then his mother and brothers showed up. Standing outside, they relayed a message that they wanted a word with him. He was surrounded by the crowd when he was given the message, "Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside looking for you."

³³⁻³⁵ Jesus responded, "Who do you think are my mother and brothers?" Looking around, taking in everyone seated around him, he said, "Right here, right in front of you—my mother and my brothers. Obedience is thicker than blood. The person who obeys God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

1 Samuel 8:4-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah,⁵ and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the LORD, ⁷and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just as they have done to me,^[a] from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

¹⁰So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle^[b] and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

Israel's Request for a King Granted

¹⁹But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

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Mark 3:20-35; 1 Samuel 8:4-20

Divisions (and Authenticity)

Kerra Becker English

How do you judge other people? OK, I know you're not "supposed" to. Jesus told us not to judge, or else we would be judged. I think that part is true. Our judgments reveal at least as much, if not more about us than they do about the people we are judging. I'd like to *think* that I'm capable of accurate character assessment, and that I have the ability to put aside all my own prejudices and see another person for exactly who he or she is, but I know I'm not. God alone can do that. We muddle through. We sometimes get it right without really trying, and we sometimes get it wrong even with the best of intentions.

For all the spiritual energy Jesus expends trying to get us to be forgiving, and loving, and kind to one another, to always give the benefit of the doubt, and to go the extra mile, we turn to read about him and his overall message in scripture, and we find out that religion can be more than just a little bit "judge-y." The Bible seems to be full of dos and don'ts. There are prescriptions for all kinds of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. God goes through these cycles of anger and forgiveness. The law doesn't help maintain control, and some of God's favorites, like David, are the worst violators of it. The prophets can't get the people's attention with either harsh words or hopeful promises. The people themselves can't be trusted to do what is good, or to even know what is good when they see it. The elders of the church complain that they need a King, and not the kind of leader God picked because they want to be powerful like the other nations. The religion scholars from Jerusalem are threatened by Jesus so they accuse him of black magic and following Satan. Having the Bible readily and easily available to us, can we, do we, do any better? Have we learned

how to recognize God's plan when we see it, or are we also trying to make it into something else we like better?

I wonder about that. There are reasons Jesus warns us to be super-hesitant in making judgments. We might clamor for a King we really don't want. We might become a slanderer and an enemy of Jesus rather than follow in his own risk-taking footsteps. And it tends to be the most religious ones who do the worst job at this. In scripture, and probably in real life too, the professionally pious don't ever seem to know what it is they're really saying. Probably best for us to be a little rough around the edges! The fishermen, the prostitutes, the beggars, the outcasts and outliers of all kinds seem a bit more clued into God's message of forgiveness and steadfast love. They actually hear Jesus when he says that there's nothing they can do or say to put them out of touch with God's mercy and abundant grace. It's the ones who are trying to protect their place in society who get sideways with that news and choose to call it out as evil. They don't really want to be equal to whoever it is they judge to be the underclass, and it shows.

We've seen this repeat itself time and again in Christian history. It's apparent in the divisions that Jesus is talking about. A kingdom divided against itself will not stand. A house in turmoil tears itself apart. The divisions are more than just the familiar political creature that we know – our ingrained and contentious two-party election machine. That division really isn't so much about the split between Democrats and Republican, though the closer it gets to another big election, that's what the advertisements would like us to think. In the larger picture, there is no clear winner – though the rhetoric will play itself out that way. It pays to be not just elected but “victorious” over some ideological competitor. Divisions always have to have winners and losers, an in group and an out group. It's a deception of the greatest order, and most of us, regardless of which political party gets our vote, know that it's mostly a plea for self-preservation of the status quo. Little changes and

the ultimate goal now is not to encourage change and movement forward, but conformity. The American people are guaranteed much more of the same, almost no matter what the outcome. Jesus despises this kind of behavior in human systems. He calls it out. He points out that the fostering of divisions that we do so well only leads to destruction.

But isn't it by nature who we are as human beings to dwell on our differences? To some degree it is. We spend our early years in life figuring out who we are, and most often we do that by comparison. I'm this, but not that. In this way I'm more like my mother, or more like my father. I choose this ideology, this religion, this club, this sports team – and reject all the rest. Richard Rohr describes this time of life as the time that we are building our containers. We are looking to figure out the outside picture of who we are. It's our resume of life choices.

But living in that divided world, as Jesus aptly points out, is not sustainable. It crumbles, it disintegrates, and it loses its power when it is precisely what the world calls "power." What he doesn't so clearly present in this passage is the alternative. What other choice do we have? I'm trying to put my own thoughts and word around this, but, what I think that he's getting at, here and elsewhere is that no one wins unless we're all lifted up together. Some may say that this makes me a Universalist – that I believe that all are forgiven, and there is no need then for hell or punishment. It is true that this passage does have hints that we can mess up pretty royally and still be covered by God's grace. Look at how Jesus says that there's nothing we can do or say that God can't forgive. Then there is a caveat to that statement. There is one thing that will truly put us crosswise with God, and that is to utter blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. But what does that mean? In "The Message" translation, it's slander against the Holy Spirit, saying things that are untrue about the one who forgives and is merciful. Ouch. So for me, that means not upholding the wholeness and grace and mercy that God is so fervently trying to get us to understand. It means calling Jesus something that

he's not. It means taking his message and twisting it for our own purposes. It means dividing the one Kingdom that is capable of standing through all else.

The opposite of these divisions in my mind, and hopefully by hearing God's voice then, is authenticity. It's seeing the truth that all people are loved by God. It's authentically reaching out for the whole rather than clinging on to the importance of our pieces. The sins that get mentioned over and over again in scripture do separate us from God in ways big and small. We lie, we cheat, we steal, we kill. We fail to love or conceive of ourselves as loveable. We hurt ourselves and God by doing those things. Yet - they are forgiven. Doubt is real, and it's OK too. What isn't OK is to make the God of our mind into something that God isn't and then use that for our own means and purposes. That is deception of the highest order and it plays out as we divide, and divide, and divide our lives. God does not want our conformity to some particular law or system. God wants our love. God wants us to give of ourselves to others. God doesn't expect us to look, act, or talk alike – that's boring. God wants us to become one in our humanity.

Who are Jesus' brother, and mother, and sisters? We all are. It may make us nervous that he says so. We don't like that he insults those who are legitimately his relations. But this is another way he tells us that our tribal mentality is flawed. When we cannot imagine that we are brother to someone of a different political party or sister to someone of another race or nationality, we're not seeing through Christ's eyes. Look around. Our brothers and sisters are everywhere. Really everywhere. The table that we set today has been used to mark insiders and outsiders, but Jesus has no reserved guest list. All can come. Even Judas, the known divider, had meals with Jesus many, many times before his descent.

So if we're going to judge, and we will, even with all the warnings, use authenticity as your guidepost. Is this person deceiving you, dividing you, asking you to change everything about you to

be more like his or her own ways? If that is the case, perhaps that person is battling the Holy Spirit, fighting the very presence of God in their own life. But if you're in the company of someone authentic, you will know. You can feel it. She or he will be in harmony with God's Spirit – no matter what else you know to be true about that person. These are the people I want to know and have in my life. They don't ever make me feel "less than," and still being around them makes me better just the same. No matter what divisions and compartments you've been in throughout your life, I encourage you to find 'your people,' God's people, and let them be a source for you of richness and strength. Amen.