

Decision Time

Mark 3: 13-35

We have to decide about Jesus.

Our verses from Mark's gospel outline the range of options available to us.

Like the various groups represented in this passage from Mark, we have to decide whether we believe his claims; whether we see divine or demonic power in his ministry; whether we will join or oppose the work of that ministry; whether we will follow him as the Messiah or seek to restrain him as a madman.

If we look, in turn, at each of the groups gathered around Jesus, we can see how their decisions about Jesus might inform and guide our own.

This third chapter of Mark's gospel continues the brisk pace that Mark established at the outset of his account of "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". One commentator writes that, "In these first few chapters, Jesus has whirled through Galilee" and that's a good description of the early period of his public ministry, from his baptism in the Jordan River, through calling his first followers, beginning his proclamation of the coming of God's kingdom in both words of teaching and deeds of healing and exorcism, and drawing large crowds as news of his healing and teaching spreads through the region.

The crowds around Jesus include some people who are simply curious about this new rabbi and others who have already committed their lives to following him. Mark tells us that from among those committed disciples, Jesus chooses twelve and commissions them to "be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons" (v. 14-15).

These twelve named apostles have made their decision about Jesus. They have decided he is someone to stay close to, someone to learn from, someone to trust. While Mark portrays the disciples as consistently unable to comprehend Jesus' words about his identity or about his path to the cross, nevertheless, these men leave behind their old lives and jobs and even families to enter fully into the life and work to which Jesus invites them.

Gathered around this inner circle is a much larger circle of people who have heard that this Jesus is healing disease and banishing demonic spirits. They have come to get some of this help for themselves or their loved one. This is the fourth time in these first three chapters that Mark has described crowds surrounding Jesus in such numbers that the house is filled to overflowing as people clamor and jostle to get close. In this instance, Mark writes that "the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat." (v. 20) Eugene Peterson translates it like this: *as usual, a crowd gathered -- so many making demands on Jesus that there wasn't even time to eat.*

These people, too, have made a decision about Jesus. They have decided that he has something beneficial to offer them. We have no indication of whether they have an opinion about the source of the power Jesus demonstrates, or whether they particularly care about that source, so long as it is used on their behalf and they come away from this encounter with restored health in body, mind, and spirit.

These first two groups of people around Jesus offer us two options: we can decide to make Jesus the center of our lives, as his closest companions do. We can decide to approach Jesus with our vulnerability and our need, as the crowds do. Both of these decisions rest on believing that Jesus comes into the world as an agent of God's benevolent love to bring healing, wholeness, and purpose to God's people. Both of these decisions accept that Jesus exercises power and trust that his power will bless rather than damn them.

Not everyone present that day when Jesus goes home has such a favorable response to his words and deeds.

Mark tells us that Jesus' family comes to restrain him in response to reports they have heard about his behavior. Scholars of ancient Israel point out that Jesus consistently transgresses social norms. He breaks with Sabbath traditions and restrictions; he associates with outcasts; he touches lepers; he makes sweeping, startling claims about the Kingdom of God. Indeed, it has already reached the point where people are speculating that "he has gone out of his mind." And so his family decides that it is time to intervene, to remove him from the public arena. As Jeanne Choy Tate explains: "In an honor/shame culture, a child's behavior -- even when grown -- is of great consequence. The social standing of Jesus' family is jeopardized by his behavior. The whole family is shamed." (*Christian Century*; 5-23-2018)

Mark brings Jesus' family onto the scene, but then places another encounter into the middle of that one and describes Jesus' interaction with the scribes before returning to the family. The gospels frequently use this literary device of setting one story within another, which allows the two stories to interpret one another; in this case, the two stories -- of Jesus' family and of the scribes -- emphasize the theological errors being made by two groups that should know better. (Matt Skinner, *Working Preacher.com*)

Scribes have traveled from Jerusalem because they too have heard reports about Jesus. Those reports of his growing popularity with the crowds are causing significant concern. In response, religious officials come and make a public accusation that Jesus is able to do impressive feats because he is in league with the devil. Seminary professor Matt Skinner writes that "Those scribes were theological heavyweights. They represent the authority and the theological wisdom of the temple establishment. Their pronouncement, that Jesus is a satanic agent and not a divine one, recognizes power at work in him. He is no charlatan or illusionist. But they decide the power is perverse. They offer the most damning assessment they can." (*Working Preacher.com*)

Jesus responds by identifying the illogic of this accusation. His works of healing have included many exorcisms; he has liberated many people from the malign and damaging spirits that have held them captive. Why would the same cruel being who imprisoned them initially now send an agent to free them? Rather, as he teaches in “a short and violent parable about a home invasion” (Skinner), Jesus is the one who is able to defeat Satan and reclaim what Satan has stolen. Mark Davis points out that “If Jesus has ‘cast out Satan’ or ‘has plundered Satan’s house of goods’, then it is not because he is in cahoots with Satan but because he has bound Satan to make him powerless to stop the plunder. Jesus’ accusers should be rejoicing in this.” (*Left Behind and Loving It*).

But instead of rejoicing, they accuse. They see the work that Jesus is doing, the change he makes in people’s lives, and attribute his power not to the God of compassion and mercy, but to the ruler of the demons.

Jesus refutes the charge. But he goes further, warning that *whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.* (v. 29)

This verse has caused much consternation through the centuries. Christians have read this verse and fretted over the possibility that they might have inadvertently blasphemed the Holy Spirit and thereby unwittingly placed themselves beyond God’s forgiveness. But in the context of this encounter between Jesus and these accusers, it is very clear that blaspheming the Holy Spirit does not happen accidentally; it is not the result of a careless word or an inattentive moment.

Commentator Brant Copeland writes that “To witness the freedom Jesus brings -- to see the broken made whole, the shackled set free, the lowly raised up, and the banished restored -- and to call **that** the work of Satan is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit. (*Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*; p. 102)

And N.T. Wright offers this insight: “Jesus’ critics have painted themselves into a corner. Once you label what is in fact the work of the Holy Spirit as the work of the devil, there’s no way back. It’s like holding a conspiracy theory: all the evidence you see will simply confirm your belief. You will be blind to the truth. It isn’t that God gets specially angry with one sin in particular. It’s rather that if you decide firmly that the doctor who is offering to perform a life-saving operation on you is in fact a sadistic murderer, you will never give your consent to the operation.” (*Mark for Everyone*; p. 38)

The scribes see the change Jesus brings into people’s lives -- the healing, the hope -- and decide they want no part of it. They choose instead to reject and slander his ministry. They deliberately mischaracterize the power of God, reject the possibility of restoration, and attempt to mislead the people into sharing their contempt and suspicion of Jesus.

What makes blasphemy of the Holy Spirit unforgiveable is not that this one sin is beyond God's power to forgive, but because, as N.T. Wright so clearly explains, forgiveness is neither sought nor desired. God's love and grace are never coercive and so will not be imposed on those who persist in turning away from the transformative power of God's grace; who insist on renouncing the benevolent, life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

We have to decide about Jesus, just as all the people gathered around him in his hometown had to decide.

Both Jesus' family and the religious authorities have decided that Jesus must be stopped. Different reasons underlie these decisions: his mother and siblings are concerned about Jesus' mental health and their own social standing while the scribes are "anxious about Jesus' authority among the crowds and are angry that he interprets faith and religious practices in ways that threaten existing traditions and lives of authority." (Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm; *Preaching Mark*; p. 59) But despite their different motivations, both family and scribes want to put an end to Jesus' public ministry of healing and proclamation.

The other people gathered around Jesus -- the ones he calls **family** because they do the will of God -- decide differently.

The crowds have decided that they want the teaching and the healing and the community which Jesus embodies and offers to them. They have decided to trust him with their frailties that need to be overcome and their dreams that yearn to be realized. They want to hear what he has to say and go where he will lead them.

The closest companions -- the twelve named apostles -- have decided to dedicate their lives to this man who has called them away from the work and connections and expectations that they have known into new kinds of relationship, new possibility, new power. They see the power of the Holy Spirit at work in this one named Jesus and, while there is much they do not understand, they have decided that the place they most want to be is within that power, joining in the work.

We have to decide about Jesus.

Amen.