

Proper 5  
Mark 3:20-35  
The household of God

In Samuel, the initiation of the kingdom of the ancient Israelites; in Mark, the initiation of the Kingdom of God. There is a common theme of leadership weaving through. What makes a good leader? How do we know whom to follow? We are on the tip of presidential election process, at the end of the month our national church will select a new presiding bishop, our own church is engaged in leadership discernment. These are important lessons for us.

The tribal confederacy of Israel was a covenant community, a people with a special relationship to God from the time of Abraham on. After the exodus and resettlement, God raised up judges as leaders. The judges' success depended on whether they were faithful to God or not, and sadly, many were not. These judges were, primarily, mediators. Although one may occasionally have been spokesperson for a whole kinship group, they were not judges in the sense we use that word today, and they did not exercise a centralized leadership. Samuel was a divinely called leader, but his sons (who would have inherited his position) were perceived as too corrupt and inept to serve after Samuel; faced with a socio-political crisis, the people ask Samuel to appoint a king. So, not an election, but a 'people's' king. The people's king is the opposite of divine initiative installing a royal line (the traditional view).

The people want someone to lead them in battles, and a centralized authority to make their loose tribal confederacy more like other nations. Samuel hears their request as a lack of faith in God, v. 6, rejecting God as their king. God tells Samuel to warn the people that such a king will take their sons and daughters, make implements of war, seize the best lands, commandeer their flocks, their grain, and make slaves of the people.

Here's the question: does authority stem from God or from the people? Isn't that the debate today in the mid-East? Iran's president Rouhani claims true leadership because he was elected; Supreme leader Khamanie says God has empowered him as Supreme Leader. Who is right?

In the book of Samuel, God gives the people freedom to choose their king. Israel's first king, Saul, is an attractive, effective leader. Thus begins 400 years of Davidic reign with immeasurable historical significance. But the predicted consequences of earthly kingdom develop.

By the time of Jesus, the monarchy – led by Herod the Great and his son Herod Antipas – is a parody of the people's vision: power-grappling figureheads of government under Roman rule. Their reigns are marked by extraordinary cruelty, greed and personal aggrandizement. The 'kingdom of the people' is waiting to be redeemed by the Messiah. Jesus announces the redeemed kingdom of God in Mark 1:15, saying, "*the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.*"

Many follow Jesus as he travels through Capernaum and Galilee, bringing healing and hope to the people. It doesn't take long for the Pharisees and Herodians to begin plotting to destroy him. Jesus goes up into the hills where – out of his many followers – he calls the twelve whom he names 'apostles,' and gives them their special commission. [parenthetically, I notice that none are offered contracts for pay; they are commissioned for the life of servant ministry]

Today's Gospel starts mid-sentence. In full, it reads, "*then he went home, and the crowd came together again.*" Then he went home – Jesus's house and family. Everything has changed. So many people now follow Jesus that the crowd cannot even raise their hands to eat. If you have been in a NY or Tokyo subway at rush hour, that's the kind of crowding Mark writes about.

How does his family respond to all the commotion? They want to put Jesus in shackles. They demean his ministry with accusations – *he is out of his mind*, they say. The scribes from Jerusalem add their voices, saying that Jesus is in league with demonic powers, with Beelzebul.

Jesus responds with a 'parable' – in Mark's Gospel a parable is more like a riddle, a warning not to hear it superficially.

*How can Satan cast out Satan?* Impossible we might say. But, if we think more deeply, the answer is, *happens all the time*. Humankind uses violence to control violence: the death penalty for those who murder; a superior army to defeat invaders; an atomic bomb to end a war. Revolution replaces one dominant power with another dominant power. Human culture is formed as a community that relies on being over or against or expelling someone: collective violence, accusers against victim. 'All against some' violence that brings peace to the majority. Suni vs. Shiite. ISIL expelling all remnants of Christianity as if it were contagious disease. There is an expression, choosing the lesser of two evils: Satan casts out Satan.

Is there another way? *Yes*, Jesus says, and he begins to teach about a new way to build the household, to organize as community. Organize around forgiveness, not accusation, become the forgiving victim, enter a life lived in the spirit instead of the flesh. The new family of Jesus is those who do the will of God: within this context, the traditional family is an anachronism. The tribal ties of earthly parents, family affection and obligation are relativized not dismissed – they are no longer the absolutes. The new family unit is the household of God.

*Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God.*

Jesus does not give in to the accusatory scribes who seek to silence him, nor to the demands of family who want to bind him. Faced with this collision of conflicting forces, Jesus refuses to act *within* the cycle of violence which forms its organizing principle. Jesus in charge of the world will not use violence to stop violence, or Satan to cast out Satan. Jesus did not come to start a new religion, but to give us a new way of being human. His vision of kingship is formed in the relationships of God's household, relationships that transcend tribal family, languages, cultures

and religions.

So what do these scriptures tell us about leaders and leadership?

We can agree that any team of people needs a leader to keep them all rowing in the same direction. The issue is not models of leadership – judges vs. kings, president vs. legislature, hierarchical chief executive officer vs. governing boards of directors. In Samuel, God warns that a leader chosen by the people is prone to domination and corruption, the very problems the people seek to avoid when asking for a king to replace Samuel's sons. The Scriptural "judges" were called by God to loving service, in faithful covenant, and the people didn't fair very well when the judges were unfaithful to God. The Herods, authoritarian kings, were likewise unfaithful to God and devoted to domination rivalries. Scripture suggests the people are best served by a leader chosen by God *and* faithful to God in leadership.

What is successful leadership today, how do we measure it? Financial or status success? What are qualifications for leadership? The millionaire businessman? Familial ties, the son or spouse of a past president? What are the measuring sticks to evaluate who is worth listening to and following? The scribes and the Pharisees thought they were righteous Jews; Jesus' family spoke out of concern for his well-being. Jesus reminds us that it is *our actions*, our way of life, that speak our qualifications.

Football coach Lou Holtz is quoted in an article by Alexander Green in e-publication *Beyond Wealth*, April 2015, as saying this:

(Inspirational) leadership begins by recognizing that everybody needs four things: People need something to do, someone to love, something to hope for, and something to believe in. At the heart of successful leadership is showing the people they genuinely matter.

'Showing people that they genuinely matter' is another way of saying, successful leaders support and love others. This is true in ministry, business, politics, sports or any other context.

It follows that leadership that fosters mutual respect is the most important ingredient for building and sustaining a healthy community. The absence of mutual respect creates a vacuum filled by power-over domination, violence, war.

Through his healing ministry, Jesus repeatedly shows the people they matter. When he tells us there is a new covenant, the covenant of the household of God, we need to listen. In the household of God, mutual respect is the governing principle. The absence of mutual respect is the vacuum filled by power-over domination, war, violence.

Jesus did not choose any of his birth family to be apostles. Jesus does not offset family relationship against discipleship. Rather, he syncretizes them by defining *both* as those 'doing the will of God.'

The Gospel homecoming stand off is not the only time Jesus wrestles with his family. At age 12, (according to Luke's Gospel), he disappears for three days and is dismissive of their anxiety during his absence. At Cana (Gospel of John) Jesus is irritated by Mary's request to replenish the wine. Still, the family reconciles in and to Jesus' ministry, and joins him.

*Standing near the cross, [John tells us], were his mother, his mother's sister Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, Woman here is your son. Then he said to the disciple, Here is your mother." John 19: 25-26.*

Jesus' brother James became the leader of the early church at Jerusalem. Gal. 1:19

There are some in our church communities whose family – parents, spouse, children –do not participate in Sunday worship or other 'church' activities. They may claim no faith, a different faith, or even be 'accusers' who experience time others spend in ministry as rejection. We often talk about balancing our family and church lives, our family and ministry as if these were competing. Family and ministry are not opposites or counterweights. Think *both/and*.

Jesus asks us to center ourselves in the household of God. Learning to ride a two wheel bicycle is not about counterbalancing, it is about holding the center steady while moving forward. A gymnast on a balance beam does not weigh one hand or foot against the other, but concentrates on keeping the core body level to the beam.

Jesus navigated the crowds demanding his attention and ministry, and his family, by centering himself in his relationship to the Father: doing the Father's will. Jesus' words in today's Gospel are not anti-family, but the realistic recognition that family can be seen as part of the problem with competing demands, or the source of deep joy at our center. We think we know what family life is supposed to look like, and we need to be reminded of the deeper source of wholeness: the household of God, doing the will of God. Home.

There is a great diversity of giftedness in all disciples of Jesus. Our total common ministry way of being church is about effectiveness in ministry, each using their gifts. Over these summer months, some of you will participate in the Christ Church general discernment group. All of you are asked to prayerfully consider who is called to the faithful leadership of supporting others in ministry. Who is centered in faith and joy, who lives by the example of 'both/and'? Who keeps the whole upright? Who values fostering mutual respect as an attribute of leadership?

Together, we listen for the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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