

Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Cor. 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

“Do not lose heart”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. In today’s gospel, Jesus’ own family sought to restrain him, exerting family pressure on him, because people were saying, “*He has gone out of his mind.*” Today’s gospel begins with Jesus returning to his home. Mark tells us, “*and the crowd came together again so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to restrain him.*” I can imagine the family saying, “Jesus, just stop it. What are you doing? Just stop it. Our family has a reputation in this community. Cut it out, come in and have dinner.”

The scribes, who were experts in the Mosaic Law and religious leaders, also came down from Jerusalem to tell Jesus to “Stop it.” They came to tell Jesus, his family and the crowds that Jesus wasn’t doing God’s will, rather, that he was possessed by Beelzebul, by Satan. They accused Jesus of casting out demons and healing the sick with demons.

So said Jesus’ family, the community and the religious leaders. I imagine Jesus looking at them, saying, “Really? Am I possessed? Driving out demons with demons? It’s quite the opposite; I’ve come to free people from the power of evil that possesses human beings. I have come to tie up the strong man, Satan, the source of evil in this world.” Describing the way evil divides people and communities, Jesus said, “*If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.*”

The word “Kingdom” that Jesus used comes from the Greek word *βασιλεία (basileia)* which means the “authority and reign of God” both in heaven and in this world. *Basileia* isn’t simply a “place,” it is the reign of God’s will and grace *extending into this world*. As Jesus teaches us to pray, “*thy kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven,*” Jesus reveals the grace and love of God’s kingdom as a *present reality* in this world. We could even say that Jesus’ words about “*Basileia*” – the reign of God – have a political dimension because Jesus is talking about the realization of the reign and governance of God’s kingdom in this world.

The word Jesus used for “house” is in Greek is *οικία (oikia)*, meaning the “dwelling places and property of people.” As the reign of the kingdom extends into this world, it also extends into human community, our cities and homes. Again, Jesus is using political language about the reign and governance of God extending as grace into the human household of this world.

Jesus' words about "kingdom" (*basileia*) and "household" (*oikia*) are, therefore, related to the English words "polity" and "politics." "Polity" and "politics" also come from a Greek word, *πόλις* (*polis*) meaning "city." Jesus describes of the reign, or "*basileia*" of God's kingdom, extending into human affairs, into cities and into our very homes. By pointing to divided kingdoms and homes, Jesus is pointing to our divided world and human inability to govern ourselves without the grace of God's kingdom.

Martin Luther, spoke clearly in his age about this, saying that there are "two kingdoms" through which God reigns and governs: the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. The kingdom of heaven is governed through the church and gospel, while the kingdom of the world is governed by law and government. For Luther these were the two means through which God works in the world. In our modernity of a separation of religion and state, we have a harder time seeing the grace of God seeking to extend itself into human polity and politics.

In other words, Jesus is saying that God's reign of grace and love *is not divided between heaven and earth*. God's will of grace and love extends from heaven into the kingdom of this world – into our cities and into our homes. To say it even more plainly, Jesus is saying, "You cannot say, 'Stop it' to God's liberating reign of grace and love in this world." If we attempt to stop Jesus and his liberation of humanity from evil and sin, we should not be surprised that this world, our cities, and our households should also remain divided.

Jesus' mother and his brothers came outside the family home to speak to him, and Jesus replied, "*Who are my mother and my brothers?*" And looking at those who sat around him – in front of his family – Jesus said, "*Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*" Jesus announces the kingdom of God in which those who do the will of God, become part of God's family – a household larger than we could ever imagine.

I can imagine Jesus saying to them, "Look at the need in this world, we are family, all of us; we are the household of God, but we are also divided against ourselves – and you want to say, "Stop it? Why? You want me to stop offering the reign of God's grace and love to this world? You want me to stop freeing people from evil and the demons that possess them. Then I ask you, what is your plan to solve human division? I'd like to hear it!" So I imagine Jesus.

I think there is a good reason that the Word became flesh in Jesus and dwelt among us. Jesus had a family like you and me. He knew a good family fight. Perhaps his family had asked him, "Why have you become an homeless preacher? Why don't you return home and help with the family

carpentry business? You're embarrassing us by attracting these needy people." Through this story we see that Jesus' own family also had to grow into faith in him, into seeing him as the Son of God. Even Mary, who had spoken with Gabriel, had to grow in faith to eventually stand at the cross.

Jesus' incarnation reveals the tension of religious authority. It reveals religious leaders who wished to control God's grace and love through endless obedience to the law. Religious leaders who wanted to control Jesus! Jesus knew the restraining power of religion from which there was no release to freedom. Across a divide of 2,000 years Jesus is still speaking about our human polity, about the way we unite - or divide - our cities and homes, and even churches.

In the midst of this tension, Jesus created new community and family, saying, "*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*" This is grace. Look around you. This church is what Jesus is talking about. We are a family of people seeking to do God's will. It is grace to be able to stand among you. Notice that Jesus said "everyone" who does the will of God. This includes people we may not particularly like, and people who may surprise us with grace and compassion.

In front of a crowd of people who came seeking grace, Jesus essentially said, "I have come to tie up the strong man of this world." In Jesus someone stronger than the rule of Satan, sin and evil has come into this world. There is no stopping Jesus. We are invited to participate in his reign of grace.

Notice that Jesus did not take time to argue about the problem of evil, about where demonic power comes from. Jesus simply faced evil, driving it out with grace and love. Jesus did not argue or speculate about where sin and evil come from; rather, he healed and freed people from the demons that possessed them. Like seeing a house on fire, Jesus did not stop to ask who started the fire; rather, Jesus worked to extinguish the fire of sin and evil in the world around him. And yet, his family and the scribes said, "Stop it" and "He's out of his mind!"

Each day we open the news apps and turn on the news only to see and hear again that the human household remains divided. Sin and evil continue to divide the household of humanity. Jesus asked those around him whose will they are seeking to live for. Saying, "*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*" Jesus is asking us whose will we are seeking to serve.

Today we celebrate the accomplishments of St. Mark's 2021 high school graduates: Lauren, Anna, Sophie, and Mary. I wonder what dreams and visions these young people have for human community. Each of them has heard the voice of Jesus, and in their own way is seeking to do the will of God in their lives. I know Jesus calls them sisters in the family of God.

In the second reading for today, Paul writes about how grace extends into the world from those

who believe and speak. Paul writes, “*So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.*” I want to say to Lauren, Anna, Sophie and Mary: “Do not lose heart.” Amidst the trouble of this world, “do not lose heart.” As you leave high school and move into a new chapter, remember that you are a beloved member of God’s family. You will always have a home here at St. Mark’s, and as you go out into the world, do not forget that Jesus has overcome the world.

I would like to share with you words of Jesus that have helped me as I think about our divided world. Jesus said in John’s gospel, “*In the world you will have persecution and troubles. Take heart, be of good courage, for I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33). Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus is alive and goes with you. Do not lose heart. Be of good courage; with Christ Jesus, you have the grace and strength to also overcome the world.

Today’s readings are not easy, and Jesus certainly did not sugarcoat his words. We also know how accurately Jesus described the human condition. Two millennia later, we still struggle with divided human kingdoms and households.

Today’s reading from Genesis describes the source of human division. God came to Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening, saying, “*Where are you?*” only to learn that the sin of division had entered into their relationship with God and with one another. The first human home, a place called Eden, had become divided. The man and the woman each pointed their fingers at one another, each one blaming the other. We see the source of our own partisan ways. No wonder we are divided. Jesus invites us to use our hands to serve God’s reign of grace rather than finger pointing.

The North Carolina Synod Assembly ended yesterday with a prayer by Synod Vice President Diana Haywood to go out into the world to be the hands of Jesus and do the will of God in this world. In Jesus, grace overcomes the sin and death of the world, freeing us to finally live with love and grace for others. Even Paul who had persecuted Christ wrote, “*And so we do not lose heart.*”

Look around you this morning. This is the family of God. Let us go out again into the world to be the hands of Jesus, doing the will of God, extending the reign of God’s grace and love in this world.

Do not lose heart. Jesus is with you. Jesus has overcome the world. Amen.