

A House Divided

Mark 3:20-35

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (Mark 3:31-33)

I'll be honest: this Gospel story hurts. It cuts close to home and raises questions I don't know how to answer.

A bit of my own story will explain why. My parents left their native India when I was two months old and raised me in an immigrant community in the United States. Like many "second generation" Americans, I have spent most of my life agonizing over my identity. Who am I? *What* am I? American or Indian? Who are my people? To whom do I belong? Where should my cultural loyalties lie?

It's from this background that I come to Mark's story of Jesus's blunt encounter with his hometown and his family. Let's get the obvious over with first: if you need Jesus to be soft and cuddly, this story is not for you. If you need Jesus to make your life decisions comfortable and scandal-free, this story is *definitely* not for you.

The setting is Nazareth. Jesus has returned home after inaugurating his ministry, and it's clear from the size and frenzy of the crowds pressing against him that his reputation precedes him. After all, much has happened since he first left home. The heavens have opened at his baptism. He has survived a forty-day fast in the wilderness. He has driven out unclean spirits, healed the sick, eaten with sinners, chosen his disciples, and declared himself the Lord of the Sabbath.

Through these and other acts, he has mesmerized every crowd he's come into contact with, stirring up such hope, excitement, and yearning in people's hearts that they can't leave him alone. They follow him to Nazareth

and pour into the house where he's staying, pressing in so tight that Jesus can't even lift his hand to his mouth to feed himself.

This state of affairs is more than enough to alarm both his family and the religious authorities. Jesus's mother and siblings arrive on the scene first, intending to stage an intervention. Mortified by neighborhood rumors that Jesus has lost his mind, Mary and her other children stand outside the jam-packed house and call for Jesus, hoping to restrain him so that they can salvage their reputation and keep him safe.

The scribes show up shortly thereafter (having come down from Jerusalem to investigate this new teacher) and declare that Jesus is evil and a threat, not a benign healer empowered by God, but a fiend possessed by Beelzebub, "the ruler of the demons" (Matt 12:22-30).

It's easy for us, having the benefit of hindsight, to write off these people who accuse Jesus of insanity and demon possession. As if discernment is a neat and tidy process for us contemporary human beings. As if we never mistake evil for good, or better for best, or bravery for insanity. The fact is, neither Jesus's family nor the scribes from Jerusalem are evil or ill-intentioned. They are earnest people dedicated to maintaining stability in a fraught time and place. Jesus's family desires order and peace in the domestic sphere, and the scribes desire order and peace in the religious sphere. Don't we all? They're not out to thwart God; they just want to keep things respectable.

Which is why, I think, I find Jesus's behavior in this story so upsetting. The Jesus of Mark's Nazareth encounter is harsh, austere, and impatient. Instead of responding compassionately to the scribes, he shreds their arguments with clever parables and accuses them of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—an "unforgivable" sin. Instead of going out to greet and reassure his mother and siblings, he rejects their interventions, renounces their claims on his life, and trades them in for a new family of his own making.

What is Jesus doing? And why does he do it so impolitely?

I wonder if he's navigating the same terrain I described vis-à-vis my childhood. Asking the same questions I've asked as a daughter of immigrants in a bifurcated world: Who am I? Who are my people? To whom do I belong? Where should my loyalties lie?

Redefining one's identity, whether in a family or in a religious institution, is a provocative act, and it almost always comes at a price. Some of the most searing and traumatic encounters I've had with my family have been around cultural and religious identity, around my longing to share with them the fullness of who I am—both American and Indian, both Christian and progressive, both feminine and feminist.

In this story, Jesus proves himself even more provocative and pays a higher price than I can imagine. Picture the scene. Outside the house stand

the insiders—the family, the religious folk, the pious, the careful. They think they have God pinned down. They know what the Holy Spirit is supposed to look like, and Jesus doesn't fit the bill.

Inside the house sit the outsiders—the misfits, the rejects, the tax collectors, the sex workers. They're not interested in dogma or piety; they just need love and they seem to have found it in a man who heals the sick and feeds the hungry. And in the midst of them? Smack in the center of the sick, the deviant, the hungry, the unorthodox, and the unwashed? There sits Jesus. Saying, "*This*. This is my family."

If we're not shaken, we're not paying attention. Jesus isn't calling for surface change here; he's dividing the house. He's going for the deep, the institutional, and the systemic. He's burning things down. Outside is in, and inside is out, and the people least likely to get it are the ones who consider themselves the most knowledgeable, the most "churchy," the most spiritually stable. I don't know about you, but when I think about who the blasphemers are in this story, I tremble. It is entirely possible (who knew?) to look God's wild, disturbing, unpredictable Spirit in the eye and call that loving Spirit insane or demon-possessed. Let's be careful at all times with our certainties.

Again, I find this Gospel reading difficult. When I think of Mary standing outside, waiting for her son without comprehending who he has become, my heart breaks. I think of my own mother and of the many times I have kept her waiting. I think of my son, and of how devastated I would feel if he renounced me.

It helps to imagine that this moment of breakage and rupture costs Jesus something dear. He knows he is Mary's son. He knows the agony of letting her go. But he knows that he's God's Son first, and that his divine identity supersedes all others. Still, I hope that it's with a secret lump in his throat that he bids his family goodbye.

At the same time, I can't help but imagine what it must have felt like to be *inside* the house with Jesus that day. I know the hunger to belong, to have someone safe and loving to belong to. Regardless of our circumstances, we all know what it's like to yearn for someone who can hold all of who we are, and love us still, without flinching. That's exactly what Jesus does for the crowds that day. He invites them in, he asks them to stay, and he makes them family.

Yes, Jesus divides the house, and division hurts. But he doesn't divide to make us homeless; he divides to rebuild. To make the house more spacious, more welcoming, and more beautiful. The fact that his work of rupture and restoration costs him in tangible ways—deeply familial and communal ways—only makes it more precious for all of us who yearn to come home.