

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 6.10.18  
Scripture:

### **1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15**

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, 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." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, and 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. Just as they have done to me, 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. Now then, listen to their voice; only — you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He 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; [and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.] He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And 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."

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

Samuel said to the people, "Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship." So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the Lord, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.

### **Mark 3:20-35**

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

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

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?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

This is sometimes considered Jesus' mission statement according to Mark: that Jesus came to this world as if to a strong man's house, to bind up that strong man so to plunder his house. In fact, a recent and laudable commentary for the Gospel of Mark is even entitled this, *Binding the Strong Man*. Its author, Ched Myers, now three editions and thirty years into the project, thus acknowledges this as central to Mark's understanding of Jesus, that Jesus according to Mark would break into this world as if into the house of a strong man, that he might bind that strong man so to plunder his house.

So much for Jesus, "meek and mild."

So much for church being boring, a place where people go to learn to be nice. (Trigger warning: if you're looking for nice, you might well be triggered by what's to come.)

So much for Jesus' family's intention to bind *him* up, so worried were they that he'd gone out of his mind. After all, picking fights with Pharisees (calling himself Lord of the Sabbath), confronting demons who confront him ("What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"), he was certainly not behaving normally.

Then there's this, that the Greek phrase here translated "gone out of his mind" is actually that "he'd gone outside." And this, metaphor that it might have been, was also actually true. Jesus had actually gone outside. Really, in this gospel narrative, Jesus is seen to have gone out a lot—out of Jerusalem to the river for baptism, out of the river to the wilderness for temptation, out of households, out of villages.

Of course, this is commonplace. We all go out of things all the time—out of the church following worship, out of the grocery store when your shopping's done.

But as Mark uses it, I think he's indicating Jesus going out of the social imaginaries by which the people understood themselves as a people—those sets of values and institutions, those laws and symbols through which a people imagine their social whole. And I think Jesus did this so to call into question the validity of those imaginaries, the adequacy of them. I think he meant to see the structures of law and language, of custom and culture, for what they are and for what they're not—that is, things that serve for a time but are far from eternal and of the Father, things that at best aim for goodness but never accomplish true goodness, and that at worst cynically exercise power for the benefit of a very few and at the expense of the whole world. Really, these imaginaries all are things that, though they might do for now, when they fall, could be goodly rid.

When Jesus goes out, I think it's as if to get a certain perspective and to regroup for his related project of going in—going in to bind the strong man and to plunder his house.

The householders, though: it should come as no surprise that the “householders,” the protectors of the status quo, would object to Jesus' plan for plunder. Though he hadn't yet articulated it quite so plainly, they perhaps could detect it—which might be why they'd come all this way. From Jerusalem to Capernaum is about eighty-five miles, Jerusalem, where the scribes had come down from, and Capernaum where Jesus likely was. That's a long way to come. They must have been had cause. The stakes must have been high. And their arrival might have been aggressively felt.

What would it take to bring CIA director Gina Haspel to your door?

Matt Skinner, of Luther Seminary, writes of these newly arrived-on-the-scene Scribes: “These...were theological heavyweights. They represent the authority and theological wisdom of the Temple establishment, the same establishment whose leaders will ensure that Pilate crushes Jesus at the end of the book. We should understand those scribes' credentials as impeccable...”

And yet.

“Those scribes,” Mr. Skinner writes, “have dismissed the possibility of God's restoration, for they write off [the work Jesus has been doing] as a satanic deception. Around them, people are being set free from their demons. People are experiencing wholeness and life. People's dignity is acknowledged. Jesus promises that sins and ‘whatever blasphemies’ may occur will prove no obstacle to people's renewal. And yet the scribes scoff and denounce all of this as false or dangerous... [They've] grown so cynical and scornful of real, manifest blessing.”

And for this, he concludes as regards that “unforgiveable sin,” it’s unlikely “they’d ever be able to experience deliverance from their own spite and nastiness,” freedom from their cynicism, scorn.

It’s this sort of freedom, after all, this sort of liberation that’s meant here by forgiveness; and it’s the lack of this sort of release, this instead emotional imprisonment, that’s meant here by an eternal sin, a blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. The verb commonly translated “forgiven,” *aphiemi*, “operates out of a sense of ‘released’ or ‘freed,’” or unbound. So, according to Mr. Skinner, “Whatever we understand ‘forgiveness’ to entail must involve more than simply eluding punishment or escaping responsibility for a misdeed.” It must involve a release, a freeing, an unbinding.

In this way, those who “can never have forgiveness” are those for whom freedom from spite, from cynicism, is foreclosed upon, those whose worldview is so intractably transactional that they can never open up to blessing that abounds. Yes, to see manifest signs of healing and wholeness, to see manifest release from the snares of this life and a liberation into joy, and then to deny the will of God at work in these things and the *power* of God at work in these things, instead to insist that these are a mere trick or even seduction of an unholy spirit: this is a self-fulfilling dynamic that even God’s healing power might do little to interrupt.

The long and short of it here is Jesus’ rejection of the Scribes’ rejection of him.

Really, the long and short of Mark’s Jesus in general is a question of which way it’s going to be, who’s realm you’re gonna live amidst, the strong man’s or the Christ’s, the one who rules by domination or the one who rules by love. And he knew the difference. Jesus knew how the kingdoms of this world worked because his family was right: he had gone out.

They were also right: such a move *should* frighten them. When we gather around the desert box for Godly Play, we’re reminded that the desert is a dangerous place. There’s little food, still less water. Worse, there’s no social imaginary by which to be held. Have you read “A Distant Episode,” the short story by Paul Bowles? That will tell you all you need to know about the risks of going outside in this existential way. And, you know, it’s not for nothing that people who have psychotic breaks often do so following a major change in their life circumstances, an exiting even of their known imaginaries—off to college, off to some time abroad. So, yes, his family was right:

this project that Jesus had taken on, it could well be the end of him. No, it *would* well be the end of him. But this was also why he'd come.

So, they weren't to restrain him even though his "going out" had already put him in the crosshairs of those who had every intent and capacity to do him harm.

Actually, if his family were to bind him that they might contain him, they'd be binding precisely the wrong one.

The Old Testament reading is one I've found funny in the past. The people Israel and Judah had become weary of being a theocracy, of being a people whose lord and king is the Lord, the King of the universe. So they went to the great prophet, Samuel, and they begged him to anoint for them a king. "...appoint for us...a king to govern us, like other nations." See, they didn't want to be the chosen people of God, or so I've preached in the past. No, they wanted to be like other nations. They didn't want God to be their king; they wanted a man for that role—and preferably, I imagine, a strong man.

But Samuel was unhappy to hear this, so he went to God and prayed to the Lord, until the Lord told him what to do. "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you," He said to the prophet, "for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them...Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall also solemnly warn them of the ways of kings."

So Samuel did. He told them, "This is what a king is good for. He will take your sons and make them either soldiers for his war-making or slaves for his well-being. He will take your daughters and make them either concubines in his harem or slaves in his household. He will take your property for his court and your livestock for his stable; he'll tax you to fill his treasury. Perhaps worst of all, he'll become king instead of the Lord your king, and on the day when you cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, the Lord won't answer you."

And the people answered, "Sounds good. Okay to that."

And it's always struck me as funny.

This time, however, I'm more mindful of what the people were in reaction to.

Prior to this now period of kings had come the grand period of the patriarchs, a mythic time from Abraham to Moses. Beginning with Joshua, though, was also the beginning of what

seems actual history—the twelve tribes, the offspring of the twelve sons of Israel, foundering under actual rule, and apparently weaker rule, their social imaginary now bound by the “real world.”

This rule of judges was a time when what power there was to wield was widely held and sloppily exercised. The tribes made war with one another in negotiating their territories amidst ever-changing crop yields and circumstances. The tribes made war with imperial powers beyond their turf. Over the centuries of decentralized rule, the people became exhausted and degraded. And their freedom, hard-won in the exodus from slavery in Egypt to living under the law and reign of the Lord in the land of Canaan, had become both weighty and decadent, a duty with no purpose until, the final note on which the book of Judges puts it, “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

This libertine version of liberty came home worst to the women, in one case gang raped to death, in another enslaved for the purpose of repopulation. It’s all told with “grim humor” in this book of Judges, which I (tellingly) have never preached on.

And then comes Samuel, the book and the prophet of the same name, to whom the people went and of whom they begged: “...appoint for us...a king to govern us...” And yes, this king would take their sons for his war and glory, their daughters for his harem, and their treasure for his wellbeing. But at least a king could stamp out the decadence of violence, the horrifying, tantalizing shows of brutal grotesquerie that, once it makes its way into a shared life and culture, it’s incredibly difficult to shake.

A television series I’ve seen a few episodes of: *Babylon Berlin*, about the Weimar Republic in interwar Berlin and the social trauma the Berliners were suffering following the first world war. This was made manifest in decadence and nihilism, thanatos, that Freudian death drive, unbound and on the loose. According to the television show, at least: pornography, prostitution, a dance club scene with a cross-dressing singer thrumming out the lyrics, “Death is very near you” while the young people dance in numb excitement. And of course it all happens just before a strong man elected would step in and clean the place up, fancy uniforms, crunching boots on the march, dignity, glory, purpose.

Genocide is so much more meaningful than suicide.

A book I should have read in advance of this sermon but didn’t: *Escape from Freedom* by Erich Fromm, German-born but written in America in 1941. Its thesis: “If humanity cannot live

with the dangers and responsibilities inherent in freedom, it will probably turn to authoritarianism.”

The kings of Israel and Judah didn't start as tyrants, but they became so.

No one who's been given absolute power has ever given it back.

Well, *almost* no one.

I admit, I love Mark's urgent, iconoclastic Jesus—not meek, not mild, rather offensive, and not in possession of the time it would take to make a case for himself. He's just gonna do it.

I admit, I love him. **But I** don't know fully what to do with him. I don't know fully how to follow him.

Don't get me wrong, I'm furious these days. I'm furious at Washington, and Wall Street, and Hollywood with its sanctimony and sexism. I'm dismayed with Silicon Valley and its “don't be evil” cuteness.

I'm disturbed by the 1% and the 0.1% and the 9.9%, of which I at least know I am one. I'm deeply disturbed at the democratic process that gave us Trump, and the cooptation of so much of American Christianity to make that happen.

I'm furious at the fact that hideous policies separating children from their parents at the border are working to increase the approval ratings of this administration. Children in detention centers! This is *popular*?!

I'm furious at Facebook, which I've quit, and at the thread that drove me off it once and for all—a colleague-friend who had criticized the young pastor in Palo Alto whose story was featured in the *Atlantic* this month.

It was a story that had struck me as strange when I first read it because it seemed so unremarkable—a pastor trying to do his job of preaching the gospel though in hostile territory, and who'd gotten in trouble with his neighborhood and the city because he tweeted about his frustration and eventual disgust at the values on display in his ministerial context. My colleague-friend indicted him for being unprofessional, and he indicted seminaries for falling down on the job of teaching their students how to preach the gospel in such a way as the people in their ministerial contexts might then be able to hear it. **And I thought, “Oh, really? It's the pastor's behavior you take issue with—and not those in the \$30 million home mentioned in the article, not them in their complaining that community groups shouldn't be able to use the church**

building like they do—a children’s community chorus, for example, whose rehearsals were apparently so disruptive that the church complied and had the practice space *sound-proofed*??

I admitted sympathy for this pastor who, though his tweeting was unhelpful, unprofessional, was still attempting something that would cause me incredible frustration, too. And then I got piled-on, accused of “otherizing” the rich, the Tesla-drivers of Palo Alto mentioned in the article, whom I’d clearly made the enemy. (Look away, please, from the Tesla parked in the pastor’s space this morning.)

And, sure, this young pastor shouldn’t have used Twitter to air his grievance. But you don’t have to think too hard to settle on someone who uses Twitter at far greater offence, and, when you’re in Palo Alto, you don’t have to *look* too far to find who thought Twitter was a good idea in the first place.

Really, you don’t have to think too deeply psycho-dynamically to figure out that we’re sacrificing all these little people because we can’t get to the strong men on top. Us driving a White House aide out of town on rail because of something gross she said about John McCain, a comment she made off-the-cuff in a private meeting and for which she apologized in phone a call to Meghan McCain; us demonstrating shock (shock!) at the foul language of comedians whose reliance on that language is to call as foul what is *actual* and not merely rhetorical; us shutting up pastors who tweet about their fury at the values of so-called liberals in their \$30 million homes and private “mass” transit bringing them from the driveways to the Apple campus where they work (that is, when they’re not driving themselves in their Teslas) all so they don’t have to interact with the poor (yuck!) or even the not-rich: we’ll kill off the committers of these little offenses because we can’t find a satisfying outlet for the daily *big* offenses.

So, I’ve quit Facebook, the fury-machine, because I’m already furious enough. I’m so angry and utterly exhasuted. And other than quit Facebook, there’s almost nothing I can do anything about it—because I’m not Jesus, so binding up those whose unfettered-ness makes me so furious is really not an option for me. My social imaginary has become nearly intolerable to me, and I don’t know what the solution is—except maybe faith.

Faith that the disturbance of the status quo, which Jesus caused, he’s still causing; faith that the binding of all these whose cruel domains we otherwise dwell amidst is yet in the coming; faith that those who would simply be human amidst a social imaginary that admits and enables and

encourages and celebrates human being and thriving are out there to be found, and are in here to be found; faith that I too can go outside, and by coming in here: I suppose that's one solution. A renewal of the faith that moves mountains, binds strong men, plunders their households for what goods can be found there, and gives word to the hope that all that is not of love will fall, is falling: this is one solution.

Another is this: I can participate in that victory of love, which you can too, beginning with the simple speaking of the word. Love.

It soothes to say: "love."

Let there be love. And there is love.

Thanks be to God.