

There is a lot going on in today's Gospel reading, so much so we find Jesus and his followers so overwhelmed they can't find the space or time to eat. It all started because of the crowd that had gathered again. And we quickly learned the crowd was diverse: not everyone had gathered around Jesus for the same reason. Jesus' healing miracles, parables, and teachings were getting a lot of attention, and not all of it was positive. We heard his family heard about the negative attention Jesus was getting, that some people were saying he had lost his mind. So, most likely out of concern they packed up and headed out to bring him back home. There were religious leaders who went even farther and said Jesus was demon possessed, doing the work the devil.

That is a lot to take in. Especially in the times we live in where perhaps we might be too familiar with how much of public discourse can sound similar, where any difference of opinion might be seen as a threat to the status quo and is dismissed by being labeled as toxic or evil. And people who don't believe the latest conspiracy theory or the latest scientific advances are dismissed as dangerous outsiders. There's a lot of us versus them talk out there, and some of it might hit close to home for some of us. Maybe some of us prickle at hearing someone called crazy as a way to dismiss them. We hear the injustice in those remarks because we or loved ones live with mental wellness issues. Others might feel the hurt of strained or estranged family relationships. We know the pain when family members choose paths different from our own or can't accept us and suddenly think us disposable or evil. That stuff is real for many, and it hurts.

These possible similarities to our own lives might make it hard to hear or take in how Jesus responded to all the attempts to polarize the crowd by demonizing him in today's Gospel, and we don't want to miss what Jesus does. Jesus responded by refusing to play into the polarization. He pointed out the flaw in the logic of division – that it tends to create more division and fails to be compassionate, healing, and forgiving – hallmarks of God's love. The problem with division is it focuses on what one is against instead of what one is for. Division needs a villain to succeed, which means it needs a victim to demonize in order to pit people against each other. When division is used as a tactic for getting something accomplished, it usually means there is a struggle for power going on, like Jesus' parable of the tied up strong man indicates.

The parable Jesus told and his teaching in the middle of all the conflict in today's Gospel point to how not everyone welcomed what Jesus brought into the world. At the start of Mark's Gospel, we heard Jesus' pronounce through him God's Kingdom of Heaven had come near and invited people to turn from the ways they were living and change to living in ways that follow God's Kingdom. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was demonstrating what that kind of living was like. For some people, this Kingdom of Heaven stuff was liberating, for others it threatened the way things had always been. God's Kingdom can be threatening to power structures that rely on keeping people in their place, that values people based on things like on their age, abilities, wealth, color, race, gender, sexual orientation, instead of valuing people as being children of God.

When Jesus healed people and pronounced people forgiven, he wasn't just restoring them to wellness, he was restoring them to a status of equality to a society that wasn't ready to receive them; a society that was quick to remind Jesus it wasn't his place to decide who is well and who is forgiven, there were systems for that kind of thing. And these were strong systems. They held a great deal of power in society. They still do. Whether that was a family system, a religious system, an education system, a medical system, a political system, or an economic system, there are plenty of systems in place that will sort humanity out.

Jesus was going against the systems and the systems were fighting back in today's Gospel the way they knew how, by demonizing him to polarize people into forming alliances to a system, in order to pit system against system.

But Jesus tied up that strong man himself by pointing to God; that healing people and forgiveness are not acts of evil, they are evidence of God's Kingdom present here on earth and that Kingdom is stronger than any system, because God's Kingdom is about love and life.

That is why Jesus looked around him and said anyone who does God's will is his mother and siblings. That's what makes us family in God's Kingdom. Some people interpret this part of today's Gospel as Jesus going on record as being against family. But I don't think that is what Jesus was saying. I think Jesus was saying God's Kingdom doesn't have to compete with systems like family, God's Kingdom can heal and renew systems, making them vehicles for God's Kingdom when they embrace and practice being part of God's Kingdom here on earth.

Please allow me an example from my personal life. I come from a family of church goers. Growing up this meant holidays like Christmas and Easter were not just times to get together and eat a lot, open presents, and share stories. They were just as much about the birth of Jesus and his resurrection. My family had traditions around these holidays that we loved. However, once I was ordained a priest, my new role in the church threatened those beloved family traditions. I

could no longer attend church with my family as I was leading services in my own parish; and I was not able to be with my family on Christmas day and Easter day. At first this was hard on my family, but we had a conversation about it. They of course understood why I couldn't skip Christmas and Easter with my parish. When I offered to be with them on different days around those holidays my family developed new traditions that they ended up liking even better. What initially felt like a threat to my family ended up bringing about a change that helped my family grow closer together. We didn't pit the system of the church against our family system, we were able to step back and make room for both. That's the Kingdom of God at work within a family unit, a family with the love of God at its core.

However, I have also had the opposite experience with a family who had a different core to their system. When my husband and I got married, his family were not church goers. Holidays meant time off work for them, and my in-laws could not understand why I couldn't take off for Christmas and Easter. Even after I invited them to attend Christmas and Easter services and offered the same option I made to my family to spend time with them on days around the holidays. To my in-laws this option was not acceptable. To them, their family tradition was more important than making room for me in their family. They were unbending, and as you might suspect, this eventually caused division and the temptation to demonize me or them. No one needs to demonize anyone, that's just the way their system works.

I bring up both examples to offer up the idea that living God's Kingdom of Heaven can look like making room for each other without using differences to harm or cause polarization. Sometimes this might work, sometimes it won't. But I believe it is worth a try.

In every crowd, there are many systems at play. Just like the one in the Gospel and the one that has gathered here today. As I keep saying, it feels good to be together again and it feels different too. We've all experienced some changes since we saw each other last. For some of us, those changes have been bigger than others. Some of us are grieving the loss of a loved one or loved ones. Some of us have been so lonely just being with each other today brings happiness. Some of us have had medical issues. Some of us have had family issues. Just like the crowd around Jesus we all are bringing something different with us today. Which means we also have the opportunity to practice some resurrection life, some Kingdom of Heaven living here on earth by making room for each other, listening to each other. I've heard colleagues comment and have read articles that say after being a part for so long, we are going to have to learn how to be together again. But what if the opportunity here isn't learning how to gather like we used to, but intentionally gathering together tenderly, lovingly

welcoming each other into a space with Christ at its center and filled with the Holy Spirit. What if we aren't just gathering together to be together; what if we are gathering to renew the commitment to living the love of God we made at our baptism. You know, to be church.

In just a few seconds, we are going to renew our baptismal vows to offer up our worship today as a way of making room for the Holy Spirit to restore us, inspire us, and renew our commitment as individuals and a parish to live God's Kingdom right here and right now. There is a lot going on today, not only in the Gospel, but in our lives, our community, our country, our world. Taking a moment to renew our faith might help us return to this world in ways that help bring God's Kingdom a little closer to us all. It is still life and work that brings me joy to share this work with you.