Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 10, 2018

Neal MacPherson

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS Genesis 3:8–15

Psalm 130

Mark 3:20–35

If we grew up with the image of a “meek and mild” Jesus, we certainly would have to alter our thinking after hearing this morning’s passage from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus surely could never be described “meek and mild.” To the contrary, he is bold and revolutionary. In his time on the earth, he turned family life and religious life upside down.

Because of his bold ministry of healing, which broke down all kinds of barriers, the religious authorities of his day called him Beelzebul, a “witch,” and said that his power came from Satan. And because of his growing notoriety, his family thought that he was “out of his mind,” in other words, mentally deranged, and they tried to restrain him.

It seems that he was getting himself into lots of trouble. But at stake was the Kingdom of God, and God’s Kingdom does not take hold in the earth softly and gently. It disrupts and challenges the way things are.

In 1st century Palestine, sickness of all kinds was viewed as the work of Satan. The process of healing was complicated and in the Jewish context was clearly in the hands of he priests. If healing did occur, certain protocols outlined by the holiness code had to be followed in order for the healed person to be restored to the common life of the community. Jesus sidestepped the process and the authority of the priests. Jesus broke down the barriers and healed persons whenever and wherever they appeared before him. The authority of the priests was clearly threatened. That is why they publicly associated him with Satan. However, Jesus answered their accusations with rhetorical questions.

“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.” —Mark 3:23b–26

Clearly, there are no answers to these truisms. Then, Jesus declares that he himself has entered the house of Satan and has tied him up, and that Satan’s house now lies in ruins. This he describes as “binding up the strong man.”

This Jesus is someone with whom to be reckoned. And then, as for those who have declared that he himself has an unclean spirit, Jesus tells the authorities that they should be on guard, lest they themselves blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, who clearly is at work in Jesus. After all, did not the Spirit of God descend upon him when he was baptized?

After all this, Jesus returns to the issue of family life. Remember that his family had tried to restrain him, thinking that he was mentally deranged. Now his mother and his brothers approach the crowds who had gathered in and around the family home and call to him. They want him to return to the confines and authority of the family. Enough of this deranged behavior! When he is told that they are looking for him, he replies, “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.” (Mark 3:24–25)

In 1st century Jewish Palestinian culture, the family was a unit of power and authority. Men ruled the household and women and children were to submit to patriarchal authority. Women might have oversight of the household, but in society women were second-class citizens. And as for children, they had no rights whatsoever, especially girls, who could be discarded and often were at the hands of their fathers. The other day, I visited a 95-year old (not a member of our church) who told me that her father, the minute he knew that his wife had given birth to a girl instead of the boy he desired, took her immediately and left her at her mother’s sister’s house. That happened often in 1st century Palestinian families.

Jesus clearly breaks open the confines of family power and authority by announcing that anyone who does the will of God is his brother and sister and mother. He envisions a larger family of followers who are to be his mother and sister and brother and mother and brother and sister to each other.

So we have here a Jesus who indeed turned religious and family life upside down. He beaks down barriers in order to allow the Kingdom of God to take hold in the earth. He seeks to undo the curse of Eden we heard described in this morning’s reading from Genesis. His prophetic ministry is bold, daring, and costly.

One can only imagine what Jesus would do in the context of our social, religious and family life. In Hawai‘i, we pride ourselves on being an open, accepting society, but there are barriers still. On my morning walks with our dog Bruno, I pass by a house with a beautifully manicured lawn and garden. But just inside the property line, the owners have placed two ugly red signs on either side of the driveway. “Keep Out” the signs warn us. There is something distasteful about those signs. I think that Jesus would not approve.

Nor would Jesus approve of children of immigrants who are trying to come to the United States being separated from their parents. Some are as young as one year old. These children, now numbering more than 2000, are being kept in a large federal facility in McAllen, Texas, under lock and key so that they will not try to escape. It is said that the children are being used as bargaining chips so that President Trump can get the border wall he wants.

What would Jesus say and do? What would Jesus say to Christian leaders who publicly endorse this policy, or who remain silent in the face of this injustice? And what would Jesus say about an American health care system that prohibits so many from getting the care they need? He whose healing broke accepted social and religious barriers in his day would not remain silent.

The Jesus whose brothers and sisters and mothers we are is calling us to break down the barriers as he did. I must say that I like the idea of this place we call our church home becoming a neighborhood center for our Nu‘uanu Valley, a place of welcome and acceptance, a place where people can receive the help they need, a place where children are received and loved, a place where elders can thrive, a place of forgiveness and healing, a place of learning and worship and music, indeed a sign and foretaste of the Kingdom of God. And all that might take place here would be inspired by the life and ministry of Jesus, not the meek and mild Jesus of conventional Christianity, but the bold, prophetic Jesus who taught us to pray: “Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

My sisters and brothers, let us never cease to look to the Jesus who boldly went about doing good. Yesterday, we adopted a new mission statement for the Hawai‘i Conference United Church of Christ. It goes like this: “Sent forth by the Spirit, we walk humbly in Christ’s footsteps pursuing peace, justice and the renewal of all creation.” It’s a statement worthy of our own consideration. And so, let be in prayer:

O God, by your Spirit, and walking humbly with Christ, grant us the grace and courage to pursue peace, justice, and the renewal of all creation, journeying forth towards that day when “the earth shall be filled with your glory as the waters cover the sea.” (Habakkuk 2:14). So may it be. And let all the people say “Amen.”