

## A Misunderstood Messiah

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20  
Mark 3:20-35

Crossroads Christian Church  
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I usually don't begin sermons with a joke, but today I'm going to make an exception. There was a Catholic priest and a Rabbi. No, there wasn't a Protestant minister with them, and they weren't walking into a bar. The priest and the rabbi had grown up in the same city neighborhood, and had been friends since they were young children. Their common calling, though in different faiths, had helped keep the friendship strong.

One day, the priest called his friend, and said "Guess what? I've been appointed a monsignor! It's a big promotion! Not many priests get it, and very few as young as I am!"

The rabbi said, "That's nice, I guess. But can you do better than that?"

"Well, maybe someday I could become a bishop. Then I'd be in charge of a whole lot of churches. But just a few of our boys get there."

The rabbi said, "That's nice, I guess. But can you do better than that?"

The priest was flustered. "Well, some of the bishops become archbishops, and they're in control over even bigger an area—a whole archdiocese."

The rabbi said, "That's nice, I guess. But can you do better than that?"

The priest sighed. "Some of the archbishops become cardinals, the Princes of the church."

The rabbi said, "That's nice, I guess. But can you do better than that?"

"Well, one of our boys get to be pope, leader of the whole Roman Catholic Church, the vicar of Christ on earth."

The rabbi said, "That's nice, I guess. But can you do better than that?"

By this time the priest was thoroughly exasperated. "What do you expect me to be? Jesus Christ?"

The rabbi chuckled and said, "One of our boys made it."

The reason that I use that joke is the question that the flustered priest asked, "What do you expect me to be?" Because that's a question that Jesus Christ himself dealt with a lot. What, or who did people expect him to be? And how did all those expectations mesh with or clash with who he was, and who God wanted him to be?

We're back to Mark's Gospel again. In Mark's gospel, Jesus hits the ground running. The tone is set in Mark 1:14: "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!" From there he goes on to call the disciples, teach, expel a demon, heal Peter's mother-in-law, heal a leper, heal a paralyzed man, forgive sins, eat with sinners, challenge dietary and Sabbath rules, heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, and cast out more demons. In other words, he was stirring things up. He was making waves. He was creating controversy. Who did people expect him to be?

They expected a Messiah, who, like David, would use God's power to conquer their enemies and to live free again. They expected a Messiah who would stage a royal banquet where those who had best fulfilled God's law would have the prime seats—the priests, the religious scholars, the Pharisees, and on down the line. They expected a Messiah who would exemplify the Torah—the Laws of God given to Moses on Mount Sinai, a role model in purity. They were expecting a Messiah who would be a wise ruler like Solomon, bringing peace and prosperity.

And what did they get? A humble, small-town, self-taught ragtag preacher who played fast and loose with the law, and who hung around with all the wrong people.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus entered a home, and so did a whole swarm of other people, hopeless people looking for hope; sick people looking for health; sinners looking for forgiveness and a new start. And Jesus' family shows up, concerned for him. Has he gone crazy? Let's get him home, let's get him some rest, let's feed him some chicken soup, and maybe he'll come around; come to his senses.

The theologians had come up from Jerusalem, for they had already heard tales of this young firebrand. Because he had so often violated the law, they just knew that he couldn't have been sent by God. Then who had sent him? Maybe Satan. Maybe the old trickster was using this young trickster to lead people off into some loopy cult. He was casting out demons because he was a prince of demons.

Jesus responded to their charges. How can Satan throw out Satan? He then coined a phrase that centuries later Abraham Lincoln would use in describing the tragedy of the Civil War—a house divided against itself cannot stand. Satan must be on his last legs. Then Jesus talks about a thief who ties up the owner of a house so he can take what he wants. In this context, Jesus is the thief! He's bound up the strong man, Satan, and is stealing people back for God. Jesus as a thief, breaking and entering, isn't something you'd expect to see in a stained glass window, isn't it? But Jesus used the image to show the intensity of his fight against evil.

Then Jesus says that people can be forgiven about almost everything, except insulting the Holy Spirit. People of tender conscience have been worrying about that one for years. They lay awake at night, worrying that somehow they might sin this one unpardonable sin and be cast into hell. But when you look at it in the context of the passage, it's easier to understand. The religious authorities had seen all the good work that Jesus was doing through the Holy Spirit and calling it the work of Satan. They'd been saying that Jesus was possessed by an evil spirit. So they were calling good evil, just because it didn't fit their preconceptions. So if someone rejects God's Spirit and its work in the world, their sin isn't unpardonable because God doesn't want to pardon them; their sin is unpardonable

because they refused to acknowledge that they got it wrong in the first place. They don't want pardoned.

Then the story switches back to Jesus' family again. When Jesus's mother and brothers arrived, hoping to get Jesus out of trouble. Let's hear the words of the passage again: "A crowd was seated around him, and those sent to him said, "Look, your mother, brothers, and sisters are outside looking for you." He replied, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?"

Looking around at those seated around him in a circle, he said, "Look, here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will is my brother, sister, and mother."

I like what Dr. Delmer Chilton says about this passage. "In that moment, Jesus redefined for all time the meaning of family. It was shocking then and it is shocking to many of us now. For the people of Jesus time and place, family was not an important thing; it was everything. Who you were, what you did, who you married, your entire relationship to society and to God were defined by your family.

Jesus was not just Jesus who used to be a carpenter in Nazareth and was now a Rabbi. No, Jesus as Jesus, Son of Joseph, of the house and lineage of David, a descendant of Abraham. Without those family connections, Jesus was nobody, at least not anybody who had to be recognized or dealt with; he was permanently "not from around here." He had done "gone off and got different."

You have heard it said that "Blood is thicker than water," but in that moment Jesus declared that "the waters of baptism are thicker than the blood of family."

Now, this did not mean that Jesus no longer loved "his Mama and them," as we say back in Mt. Airy. It did mean that Jesus declared a rearrangement in the order of his relationships; and by so doing, rearranged the order of our relationships too."<sup>1</sup> (unquote)

Later, Jesus' family would also end up as followers of Jesus. In that culture, family relationships were what defined you. But Jesus wanted us to take a wider, broader view. Our biological family is important, and we love them—or at least we try to. But we're also part of our faith family—the church, but more than that. We are part of God's family. Remember how Jesus said that whoever does God's will are his brothers and sisters?

What is God's will? Jesus answers that question later in Mark by quoting the first and greatest commandment, to love God with everything we are and have. Thomas Troeger says, "If we keep the first commandment, we will discover the unconditional acceptance and the indestructible joy that even the most loving family can provide."<sup>2</sup> Then we add the second commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves, which lets God's love

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<sup>1</sup> Delmer Chilton, *Lectionarylab.org*, June 7, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Troeger in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 109.

work through us and through our relationships. Keeping the Great Commandment is how we do God's will. Go therefore and be part of God's family. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon