

Clash of Authorities!

Mark 3:13-35

1 Samuel 8:4-20; Psalm 130:1-8; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Crazy Kids

The fire trucks came screeching to a halt in front of 631 Fourth Avenue, as the neighbors came out to wonder what was going on in the Greens' house. Not much. The only thing the firemen found was one of our children drying his wet socks over the electric heater and smoking up the place. Kids do crazy things. My friends and I made a valuable discovery – that roofs are a terrific hiding place, that's where we went to escape. Then there was the teenager who thawed out the frozen fuel line on his car with a propane torch. (True story.) He survived, but his car did not. Neither did the neighbor's car parked next to his. And of course there is the childhood sacrament of baptizing the cat, by immersion, of course – which may not be much less dangerous than thawing a fuel line with a propane torch.

Kids do crazy things, and Moms come to the rescue. Kids would have no fun without dads to encourage foolishness, but we need mothers to bind up the wounds. Ruth has made a career of driving victims to the Emergency Room, first our own and then college students. She says the human race would not survive without mothers to protect kids from killing themselves.

Crazy Jesus

Jesus was no longer a kid, but what He did was just as crazy as playing on the roofs. As His ministry was gathering momentum, He took His disciples up a mountain by themselves. There He appointed twelve to be apostles. "Disciple" means "learner," and these were men who were following Jesus and learning from Him. They heard Him preach to the crowds and talked with Him in private. They saw Him heal the sick and cast out demons. They were becoming acquainted with Jesus' ministry, and they would have been able to discuss Jesus' message with those who might inquire. But now Jesus chose twelve for a different role. An apostle is more than a learner or a secondary teacher. An apostle possesses the authority of the one who commissions him. Pastor Matt might have strong opinions about the meaning and application of our laws, but that's all they are – strong opinions. He may be right, but his opinions have no force other than Matt's own personality. A judge, however, has authority to decide the meaning and application of our laws, and his ruling is authoritative. His ruling can be enforced by the power of the state. Similarly, any of Jesus' disciples could repeat His message to others. They could explain what Jesus was saying and urge others to accept His message. But an apostle speaks with the authority of Jesus Himself.

Appointing men as apostles looked crazy. Governors and emperors appointed apostles. They had authority to grant. By this action Jesus is claiming to be more than the most popular preacher in history. Jesus is claiming to possess governing authority. Jesus is multiplying His ministry twelve times by empowering these men to do what He was doing. Furthermore, selecting twelve was startling. Everyone would have recognized the significance of selecting the same number of men as the number of patriarchs of Israel. Jesus was doing no less than establishing a shadow government! This was more than an edgy church growth strategy. This was treason! Liberation theologians are half right. Jesus was a revolutionary. But in theology being half right makes you all wrong. Jesus' revolution was colossally disappointing to the revolutionaries of His day and every day. Jesus' revolution was silently subversive, and it was total.

Mom to the rescue! What would you mothers do if your son began to overthrow the government? Jesus' family said, "He is out of His mind." Wouldn't you agree? Revolutions are violent affairs. People die. Even the successful ones are gruesomely destructive. But twelve unarmed men against the power of the Jewish establishment and the Roman Empire? Truly deranged. Clinically insane. What do you do when someone has become insane and is about to get himself and all his friends killed? Kidnaping seems like a reasonable option.

Meanwhile the political authorities were equally alarmed. The scribes in this passage were not country pastors, but men from the seat of religious and political power. In Judea those two powers were inseparable. These leaders tried to squelch the insurrection by a favorite weapon of politicians: slander. When you cannot win an argument, demolishing an opponent with a mud-slinging campaign is a cheap, easy, and remarkably effective way to neutralize an enemy. We see it every day in our own society. Until now the authorities have questioned, challenged, and opposed Jesus' ministry, but now they employ the nuclear option. They declare that the power behind Jesus' miraculous work is Satan himself.

Commercial Break

Before we see how this confrontation ends, we pause for a commercial break – or a teaching break, for Jesus was truly a rabbi. Jesus stated the obvious – that Satan would ruin his own cause by attacking his allies. Hitler's armies dominated Europe while Germany had a truce with Russia. But when Hitler attacked Russia, he was soon fighting a losing war on two fronts. It is a dumb idea that Satan would attack his own demons. But Jesus adds that a successful attack on Satan's forces could only be mounted by someone stronger than Satan. "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man." From the beginning of His ministry Jesus has been plundering Satan's house. Every day He walks in the front door and carries out valuable possessions. How can Jesus get away with this? Jesus has tied up Satan. So Satan watches piteously while Jesus easily spoils Satan's kingdom.

There are still stray demons on the loose, but the message of the gospel is that Jesus has come and tied up Satan. Revelation chapter 20 shows Satan locked up in a bottomless pit. He is unable to deceive the nations anymore until Jesus lets him out. True, demons can make mischief for us, mainly in lands where the gospel presence is weak. But Jesus is overwhelmingly more powerful than Satan. We have nothing to fear from Satan, and the gospel puts his demons to flight. Every day until Jesus returns, Jesus is plundering Satan's house, releasing those held captive by the power of darkness. This is good news for all the world!

Jesus goes on to warn the scribes that they are making a deadly mistake. Jesus introduces the eternal sin for which there is no forgiveness. This "unforgivable sin" has disturbed people who wonder if they might have committed it and are thus forever damned. If you are worried about the unforgivable sin, you most definitely have not committed it! The ones who have, are not the slightest bit worried. Jesus identifies the unforgivable sin as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Blasphemy means insulting a deity. Mark explains what Jesus meant here in verse 30 where he writes, "for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" So the unforgivable sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is saying that the spirit of Jesus is unclean. In other words, if you hear Jesus speak, and watch Him heal, and conclude that His spirit is evil, then you have insulted the Holy Spirit and will never be forgiven. This is not so much a punishment as a consequence. The only forgiveness there is, is with Jesus. If you conclude that Jesus is empowered by evil, you will never seek forgiveness from Him and never receive forgiveness for your sins.

None of us are born righteous. We all enter this world opposed to God and suspicious of Jesus. If immediate, warm acceptance of Jesus were the condition of salvation, no one would ever be saved. It is normal for sinful people not to believe in Jesus at first. It is normal for sinners to reject some of Jesus' teaching. Unbelievers do not recognize Jesus as the divine Son of God. Unbelievers do not think Jesus' death rescues us from sin. But many sinners listen to Jesus. Many think that a lot of His teaching is valuable. Many sinners gradually believe in Jesus more and more until they receive eternal life. But if you hear Jesus and conclude that He is demonic, you will leave and never come back. The next time you see Jesus will be when He sentences you to hell for your wickedness.

If you are here and do not believe in Jesus, you have not committed the unforgivable sin. Come back each week. Listen to Jesus in the scripture and sermon. See Jesus feed us with bread and wine. Ask God to enable you to believe, and God will give you the same Holy Spirit that Jesus has.

Jesus, Family, State, and Church

Jesus demolished the attempt of the scribes to discredit Him, and when His family renewed their efforts to seize Him, Jesus refused to join His family. The family thought they had Jesus' best interests in mind, but Jesus repudiated their efforts. The civil authorities thought they had the interest of the state in mind, but Jesus ignored them. Both family and state thought they had authority over Jesus, and both were wrong.

Jesus did not reject the family as a godly institution. Jesus honors the family. Later in Mark's gospel we read of Jesus' upholding marriage against the divorce-happy religious leaders. (Mark 10:2-12) In that passage He welcomed children and gave them a special blessing. (Mark 10:13-16) On the cross, moments before His death Jesus gave the apostle John the care of His mother. (John 19:25-27) Jesus reinforced His commitment to the family in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and said marriage was a picture of His own relationship to the church. (Eph 5:22-6:9)

All over the New Testament Jesus honors the family, and we should, too. Every family has its black sheep, and no family is perfect, but families are God's gift for our welfare. Family is where we learn to walk and talk. Family cares for us as we grow into adulthood and provides support all our lives. No one loves us like our family. Family members may lose their patience with each other and sin against each other, but there is an invisible bond which holds us together. No one loves you like your family – except Jesus. It is shameful to be disloyal to your family, but family cannot claim your first loyalty.

Jesus was not dismissive of the state. Jesus respects the state as an institution that God established for the good of society. When challenged about paying taxes to a wicked pagan government, Jesus taught that people should pay taxes to Caesar. When He was wrongly arrested, falsely accused, and unjustly executed by the Romans, Jesus submitted to Pilate, the Roman governor. In Paul's letter to the Romans and in Peter's first letter Jesus taught that His followers should obey the civil authorities. (Romans 13:1-8; 1 Peter 2:13-15)

Each people has outstanding strengths, and each nation has impressive virtues. Everyone should be proud of his own heritage and country. Each people also has its weaknesses, and no nation is perfect. Far from it! But it is perverse not to take pride in the accomplishments of your own people. Civic pride properly resides in other institutions as well: political parties, labor unions and professional associations, cities and towns. Jesus loves all peoples, and Jesus will bring every nation into His eternal Kingdom. It is good to love your people, nation, and party, but none of these can claim your first loyalty.

Jesus honors the family and respects the state, but Jesus loves the church. In Ephesians Jesus compares His love for the church to the love of a husband for his wife. (Eph 5:24-30) The whole New Testament breathes this love which culminated in Jesus' dying for the church. And in Revelation chapter 19 Jesus' joy over the church is expressed in the exuberance of a wedding feast. (Revelation 19:6-9) The church is what Jesus came to die for. Jesus did not die for isolated individuals so that each one could be free from his sin and live on his own terms. Jesus died for a people, a nation, a household, a body. Anyone who is saved from sin is saved into the church, and anyone whom Jesus loves is incorporated into the church.

The word "church" is not found in this gospel passage, but this is the beginning of the church. The apostle Paul said, "...you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone..." (Ephesians 2:19-20) In this passage of Mark's gospel where Jesus appoints the apostles, Jesus is laying the foundation for the church. And by church, scripture means more than those good folk who love Jesus. The church is populated by people saved by Jesus, but it also has an institutional structure. Here Jesus laid the foundation with the apostles, and Jesus will build on that foundation by adding

evangelists, pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons. Jesus is thrilled with His bride, the church. But the church is made up of people, and so sin is still present in the church. And over the past 2,000 years we can see that the church has made some horrible mistakes. Yet through it all, Jesus' love for the church never fades. The church is the new nation of saints, the new family of God, the new household of faith. Jesus lays claim to our first loyalty, and that loyalty is expressed by our commitment to the church.

Jesus is Central, Church is Primary

Jesus honors the family, respects the state, and loves the church. This means that of the three human institutions God established for human flourishing, the church is central. This does not mean that the church may intrude into family matters or dictate to the state. In Medieval times the church owned much of the land and lorded it over the nations of Europe. This is a gross distortion of the role of the church. God has appointed civil rulers to govern the affairs of all men, and the church is not authorized to seize that role. In some places the church attempted to tell families what to wear, where to work, and whom to marry. This also is a gross distortion of the role of the church. God has appointed families to work, bear and rear children, and care for each other. The church has no business intruding into these matters.

In the PCA we say that the authority of the church is "ministerial and declarative." That means that the church is authorized to declare what Jesus says and to serve people in accordance with scripture. Jesus says that Christians must not marry unbelievers. The church is authorized to teach this, and to insist that her members obey. The church is authorized to expel anyone who refuses to obey scripture. However the church is not authorized to tell you whom to marry. The church is authorized to inform the state of moral principles and practices which promote the health of the community. However the church is not authorized to tell you whom to vote for or which bills should become laws. The church is a social organism, and needs established procedures and policies to operate effectively. During this pandemic most churches asked everyone to wear masks. This was a matter of public health and neighborly courtesy. Honorable men and women should honor such requests. But this is a social expedient, not a matter of faith. It is churlish to oppose reasonable policies, but the church may not excommunicate anyone for disobeying them. The church is authorized to declare and enforce what Jesus has said: no more, and no less.

Jesus is central to all of life. He rules the world through the institutions He has established. Of these the church is central. Most of our waking hours are taken up with family activities, and the state regulates our civic life – but the church influences *all* of life. Jesus subverts and renovates family and state through the church while supporting them. Jesus works in the church through the means of grace: proclaiming the gospel, praying, and administering the sacraments. By patiently, faithfully, persistently preaching the gospel, praying for the world, and administering the sacraments the church is Jesus' instrument for renewing the world. How does this work? How can what we do here in Lehigh Valley Presbyterian Church have any effect on the families and civic life of the Lehigh Valley? Sometimes we can see God's hand at work, but most of the time it is not visible to us. We minister by faith. We believe Jesus's words and we live by them, trusting that He will save the world as He has promised.

This means that the calling of the church is to dispense the means of grace. There are many activities which are a great benefit and blessing to a community. Children need to be educated, everyone needs food and shelter, public parks are wonderful for recreation, etc. The church may participate in community functions, but the church is called particularly to minister the means of grace. It is the only institution authorized to do so. If the church does not preach, pray, and offer the sacraments, the spiritual life of the community will wither and die. From its beginning the church has provided services for scripture and prayer every day, and the Lord's Supper every week. Not every congregation can do this, but that is our desire. The one thing the church *must* do is offer frequent (if not daily) opportunities to receive the means of grace.

This means also that membership in the church is more important than family or civic membership. Most of our week is spent with our families, in the workplace, and in our communities. This is how it should be. Christians should not be badgered into coming to church every day, or spending a lot of the weekday at church. Importance is not measured by length of time. Although it is proper to spend less time at church than in your family and community, your membership in the church is the most important. Look around. These are your spiritual mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. This is the spiritual family, the spiritual community who will enter eternity with you. These are your primary and most enduring relationships.

We have an opportunity each week to express our ties in this spiritual family. When we pass the peace, we are confessing our unity as the body of Christ. Of course you first turn to your earthy family in your pew, but this is also an opportunity to express your bond with others in the service. As this pandemic winds down, be sure to get out of your pew and greet others here who are in the family of Christ. This is an ideal time to look for any unfamiliar faces, greet visitors, and make everyone feel welcome.

Sit with Jesus

After silencing the scribes, Jesus' family made another attempt to grab Him. Then, "looking about at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.'" Jesus is looking for those who will sit at His feet as He teaches, and who will do the will of His Father. This is not a comment on how tired the people were, that they needed to sit; nor how pleasant Jesus' feet were. This is an expression for submission. To sit at Jesus' feet means to hear, believe, and obey Him – and this is Jesus' call to you today. Sit at His feet. Hear His words every day. Pray for grace to believe. Go forth to obey. Such are the people in Jesus' new family, new household, new Kingdom. There is always room at Jesus' feet. Come. Sit awhile.

Jesus is present in the church and touches people through the means of grace. Jesus' call to the church is to make room at His feet for the nations to sit. Offer many opportunities to hear the word of God. Provide many opportunities to join in prayer. Serve the Lord's Supper on every Lord's Day. Scour the highways and hedges and urge people to come sit with Jesus.

Families must sit with Jesus. There is something better than the love you share with each other. It is the love you share with each other *in Christ*. Read the Bible every day, as much as possible, and pray together. You do not have to be a skilled theologian or eloquent speaker. Simply read a paragraph or two of scripture and ask God for His blessing on your family in simple, ordinary words.

Civil rulers, you also must sit at Jesus' feet. Obey God. Pursue justice and shelter the helpless. You see the disaster that comes upon rulers that ignore God. Submit to the teaching of the church as it faithfully expounds the Bible.

Counter-revolution Bust

The counter-revolution was a complete failure. Jesus' family and the scribes accomplished nothing. If your family will not submit to Jesus, you also will accomplish nothing. If a nation will not submit to Jesus, it will degrade and eventually collapse. True, the scribes eventually trapped Jesus and had him put to death, but that was Jesus' ultimate triumph, as in one stroke He defeated Satan, destroyed sin, conquered death, and opened heaven to all believers. If you will not sit at Jesus' feet you may have some temporary success, but then eternal failure and misery. But if you *will* sit at Jesus' feet – hear His word, believe and obey Him – you will become part of Jesus' new family and will grow closer and closer to Jesus and to each other. In this life you will suffer, but, like Jesus, you will conquer and reign with Him in eternity. Those whom Jesus welcomes He never casts out. When Jesus brings you into His eternal family, He keeps you safe through sin and suffering until He brings you home.

When the hungry crowds gathered at Jesus' feet, Jesus fed them. Today Jesus has fed you with His word, and soon He will feed you with bread and wine. This is ordinary bread and wine, but you will receive more than physical nourishment. As we partake of this sacrament, Jesus Himself enters you. And whom God has joined, no man can tear apart. Bride of Christ, Rejoice! For your husband is here and loves you!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you did not come merely to save us from our personal sins and then abandon us like an unwanted baby – but you established the church to be an eternal family for all who believe in you. We are so relieved that you did not abandon the church when she committed serious sins, but you continue to love her and nourish her. Lord, we are prone to confusion, frustration, and even anger at your church. We confess that we have sinned by this, and we ask for your forgiveness. Help us to see the church as you do – as the radiant bride of Christ.

And furthermore, Lord Jesus, help us to sit at your feet. We confess that we are so busy with important things, and we are so convinced of our own importance, that we scarcely have time for you. We repent of this sin. Grab our attention and draw us to yourself everyday. Create in us a heart to hear you and a will to obey. This we pray through your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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