

Sunday, June 10, 2012: Mark 3:20-35

We might be tempted to adopt a vague notion of “faith” as the only criterion for inclusion in this family, but Jesus’ teaching will not allow us to separate faith from faithfulness or discipleship from submission.

by [Chris Blumhofer](#) in the [May 30, 2012](#) issue

I worship in a congregation whose members sometimes hesitate before responding to scripture readings with “Thanks be to God!” On one Sunday, after hearing Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats and the strong words of warning at the end of that parable, they were so restrained that the liturgist looked up from his Bible and remarked, “You’re not so sure about that, are you?” It was a penetrating observation. Judgment, warning and division often make us stammer out our thanks. This narrative from Mark contains all three of those elements. Yet its words also call for our thankful response.

The religious leaders of Jerusalem traveled to Galilee to observe Jesus at work but wrongly identified the Messiah as a man possessed by a demon. They were not the only ones: Jesus’ family approached him as if he were insane, which was likely a way of charging him with demonic possession. It is hard to believe that people so learned and so close to Jesus could be so mistaken about who he was. Jesus warned religious leaders that they were perilously close to committing an eternal sin by rejecting the one who sets them free. Then he broke with his family—disregarding his mother—and established a new family composed of those who sit at his feet and do the will of God.

Several strands of the story rise to the surface. Consider the confrontation between Jesus and his accusers. Gentleness and subtlety are not hallmarks of Jesus’ teaching in this passage. Jesus presents himself as a thief who has entered into the strong man’s house—Satan’s house—and tied him up. Now Jesus is moving through the

house plundering what was once Satan's, taking back the lives of men and women that seemed consigned to suffering.

His grace still works this way. William, a man whose life had been ravaged by a seven-year addiction to cocaine, had lost everything that was dear to him. Then Jesus found him in a homeless shelter. When I met him William was what I, as a new chaplain, least expected: someone who wanted to turn every aspect of his life over to Jesus as quickly as possible. "I have given my life to Lord Jesus and been forgiven, now I'm ready," he announced. "How do I call my daughter and ask her to forgive me? How should I get in touch with my mother and tell her I am sorry for stealing from her?" I am not sure how insightful my responses were, but I was confident that I was to respond, "Thanks be to God!"

We are set free by Jesus for life with him. Jesus insists that belonging to his family requires obedience. Here this means assuming the posture and practices of a disciple. Catholic priest and theologian Gerhard Lohfink explains that in Mark's Gospel, people who do God's will are those who believe the message of Jesus and let themselves be caught up in the restoration of God's kingdom. We might be tempted to adopt a vague notion of "faith" as the only criterion for inclusion in this family, but Jesus' teaching will not allow us to separate faith from faithfulness or discipleship from submission.

In the shelter where I met William, worship services reflected this radical redefinition of God's family. Alongside the homeless and poor of our town, a local businessman came to worship in the shelter and share the story of his battle with alcoholism. A dignified retired woman showed up to remember the year that she spent destitute and homeless. A mentally ill woman came to sing the hymn that brought her peace: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

The invitation to join God's family takes its toll on Jesus' relationships. One strand in the narrative highlights Jesus as a rebellious child and brother who was willing to break the tight bonds of family in his devotion to God. This emphasizes the way the gospel claims an allegiance that transcends even the most important human relationships.

But there is another way of conceiving Jesus' break with his family. In Mark's Gospel Jesus is first and foremost the Son of God (1:1). Thus, instead of casting Jesus as the rebellious child, this text shows us that it's those who resist Jesus' teaching and

reject his ministry who are the rebellious ones.

If we read Mark 3 with this emphasis on Jesus as the faithful Son, we hear a bit of the Old Testament in Jesus' words. Moses blesses Levi's break with his kin: "[He] said of his father and mother, 'I regard them not'; he ignored his kin, and did not acknowledge his children" (Deut. 33:9). Through his singular devotion to God, Levi can make an acceptable offering to God on behalf of the people.

I can imagine William, after hearing about the one who is faithful on behalf of those who are not, shouting in his ragged southern voice: "Thanks be to God!"