

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

*I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart;
before the “gods” I will sing your praise!
I will praise your name
for your unfailing love and your faithfulness.*
Let us worship God.

(Psalm 138.1-2)

HYMN: Joyful, joyful we adore you**PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:**

Eternal God, our Creator and Father:

Once again, we come into your presence together to worship you. We are people from many walks of life, whom you have called together to be part of your family, and also to *be* family to each other. We have come to meet with you, in order to be built up by your blessing, and guided by your message.

We realize, however — and we confess to you — that we have often failed to be and do what you want of us as your children — in our individual lives, in our family life, and in our congregational life. We have listened to our own desires more than to your will and purpose. We have treated others with insensitivity rather than compassion. We have been more interested in temporary things than eternal things.

We acknowledge, then, that we have sinned, and we ask you to forgive us. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, renew our relationships with you and each other, we pray, so that we may become more like you in our thoughts and actions; and so that we may help you carry out your gracious purpose in our lives and our world.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

THE LORD’S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*There is one God
and one mediator between God and humanity:
Jesus Christ, himself human,
who gave himself as a ransom for all human beings.*

(1 Timothy 2.5-6a)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:**- First Reading:** 1 Samuel 8.1-22 - Israel asks Samuel for a king

In this passage, the people of Israel ask the prophet Samuel to appoint someone to be their king.

Up to this point, Israel has been a loose federation of tribes with no central government, and has been led by people traditionally called “judges”. Now the people ask to have a king, such as other nations have.

- Psalm: Psalm 138 - “I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart”.

Psalm 138 is a psalm of thanksgiving.

In it, the writer thanks and praises God for having rescued him from trouble.

He concludes the psalm by expressing his trust in God’s care.

- Letter Reading: 2 Corinthians 4.13-18 - Paul’s faith sustains him

In this reading, Paul speaks of how his faith gives him strength to keep on carrying out his ministry in spite of opposition and persecution.

- Gospel Reading: Mark 3.20-35 - Jesus faces opposition to his ministry

In this passage, Jesus experiences opposition from two quarters — his own family, and teachers of the law from Jerusalem.

It is still early in Jesus’ ministry, and he is still ministering in his home territory of Galilee, in northern Israel.

SERMON: “The Bigger Picture”

Today’s Gospel reading is one of the few times in which we encounter members of Jesus’ family in the course of his ministry. In the accounts of Jesus’ birth and childhood, of course, we encounter his parents, Joseph and Mary. But during Jesus’ ministry, his family is pretty much out of the picture.

The Gospel of John, though, tells a short story in which Jesus’ brothers kid him about his growing fame. They say to him, *You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world!* (John 7.3-4).

Did Jesus have brothers? Yes he did. In fact, the Gospels of Mark and Matthew both say he had *four* brothers, and that their names were James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. They also say that Jesus had sisters, but they don’t say how many, or what their names were. Of course, since Jesus was the firstborn in the family, they would all have been younger than him. And, if Jesus was indeed about thirty years old when he began his ministry, as Luke says he was (Luke 3.23), most of his brothers and sisters would have been adults by then. At any rate, today’s reading is the only story in *Mark’s* Gospel in which Jesus’ brothers appear. Jesus’ sisters, on the other

hand, don't appear in any of the Gospel accounts. The only time they're even mentioned are in Matthew's and Mark's versions of the story in which Jesus speaks in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth; and even there, all that is said is that Jesus *had* sisters.

Today's reading mentions Jesus' mother, too, although not by name. Outside of the accounts of Jesus' birth and childhood, she also appears only rarely in the Gospels. In John's Gospel, though, she figures prominently in the story of the wedding in Cana, at which Jesus turns water into wine. In John also, Mary is present at Jesus' crucifixion, although none of the other three Gospels say so. In *Mark's* Gospel, today's reading is the *only* story in which she appears.

As for Joseph, Jesus' father, the last time we see him in the Gospels is in the story in Luke in which he and Mary take the twelve-year-old Jesus with them to the Passover festival in Jerusalem, and in which the young Jesus stays behind when his parents head back home (Luke 2.41-52). Joseph never appears again in the Gospels after that; and for that reason, it has traditionally been assumed that he must have died sometime before Jesus began his ministry.

Perhaps, then, today's reading helps to explain *why* we hear so little of Jesus' mother and siblings in the Gospels, for in it, we see a certain tension between Jesus and the rest of his family.

Today's reading actually consists of two stories — one involving Jesus' family, and the other involving teachers of the law who have come from Jerusalem, presumably to check Jesus out. Remember that we're still in the early part of Jesus' ministry at this point in Mark's Gospel, and that Jesus is still in his home territory of Galilee, in northern Israel. In today's reading, Mark does something that he does at other places in his Gospel as well: he starts telling one story, then interrupts the story to tell a second story, and finally comes back and finishes the first story. So, in today's reading, the story involving Jesus' family is Story Number 1, and the one involving the teachers of the law is Story Number 2.

Story Number 1, then, begins with Jesus' family going to where Jesus was *to take charge of him* (Mark 3.21). At this point, we don't know exactly *whom* Mark means by "Jesus' family", but when he comes back to Story Number 1 toward the end of the reading, he makes it clear: they are Jesus' mother and brothers; in other words, Mary and her boys — James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. They've come to collar Jesus, and take him back home. Why? Because *they said*, "*He is out of his mind*" (Mark 3.21). Mark doesn't say *who* said that Jesus was out of his mind; it could've been his family themselves, or it could've been other people. In any case, it sounds as if Jesus' family is either offended or embarrassed by what he's been doing, and want to get him back home.

Neither does Mark explain *why* people would've been saying that Jesus had lost his mind. What has he been doing up to now? He's been going from place to place in Galilee as a traveling rabbi, speaking in synagogues, and healing people with all kinds of disabilities and diseases. At times, he's attracted such a great following that he's been forced to retreat to sparsely populated areas; and still people have gone in large numbers to hear him, or be healed by him. A couple of times already, even this early in his ministry, he has gotten into disagreements with

teachers of the law — men who were the official teachers and interpreters of scripture. And in today's story, he's in a house, somewhere, surrounded by people who are eager either to hear him or be healed by him.

But does that constitute insanity? madness? Maybe Jesus' family felt he was pretending to be something he wasn't. Perhaps they felt he was neglecting his responsibilities to his family as the oldest son. Maybe they thought that the family carpenter shop was where he belonged, rather than the front of a synagogue. In any case, they were apparently opposed to his ministry. Not only did they not support his ministry, they wanted him to give it up and come home. Why do we hear so little of Jesus' family in the Gospels, then? Because they apparently didn't support his ministry, and weren't involved in it.

In Story Number 2, the teachers of the law from Jerusalem have an even harsher assessment of Jesus. They claim that he is possessed by Beelzebul. "Beelzebul" was originally the name of a pagan god, but by the First Century, it had become an alternative name for Satan. This accusation related specifically to the exorcisms Jesus had been doing; for what the teachers of the law were saying was, *By the prince of demons he is driving out demons* (Mark 3.22). It was quite an accusation, then — that he was possessed by not just a run-of-the-mill demon, but by "the prince of demons" himself!

Jesus defends himself first by pointing out how illogical that accusation was. For Satan to empower Jesus to drive out demons would be self-defeating — it would make no sense at all for him to do that. *A house divided against itself can not stand*, Jesus says (Mark 3.25) — a saying quoted centuries later by the American president Abraham Lincoln. Rather, Jesus pictures himself as a burglar, stealing from Satan. By driving out demons, he is in fact tying Satan up and stealing back from him the lives that Satan himself has "stolen" through demon possession. Keep in mind that, in the First Century, illness and disability — in particular, mental illness — was believed to be caused by demons or "unclean spirits". Perhaps some of the people gathered around Jesus in that house that day were ones he had "stolen" back from Satan, by healing them.

It's at this point that Jesus addresses particularly strong words to the teachers of the law who have found fault with him. *Truly, I tell you*, he says, *people can be forgiven all their sins, and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin* (Mark 3.28-29). In case the reader should misunderstand what Jesus means, Mark adds an explanatory comment, saying, *He said this because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit"* (Mark 3.30).

Mark's explanatory comment helps us understand that it was the teachers of the law themselves who were "blaspheming against the Holy Spirit" — that is, dishonoring or speaking contemptuously of the Spirit. They were doing so by claiming that Jesus was possessed by an "unclean" or evil spirit, when, in fact, it was the Holy Spirit who empowered him to drive out demons. In effect, then, they were calling the Holy Spirit an "unclean" spirit.

Apparently, this was no slip of the tongue, either. Rather, in their disapproval of Jesus and his ministry, the teachers of the law were prepared to discredit everything he was doing. Unfortunately, Mark doesn't explain what exactly it was that they had against Jesus. In any case, they didn't want to acknowledge that he was in fact doing good, and so they had no compunctions against saying that he was driving out demons by the authority and power of Satan himself. It reminds me of a verse in the Book of Isaiah, in which the prophet says,

*Woe to those who call evil good,
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!* (Isaiah 5.20)

That's exactly what those teachers of the law were doing; they were willfully blind, and it's for this reason that Jesus said such a sin will not be forgiven.

At this point, then, Mark returns to Story Number 1. Mary and her sons arrive at the house where Jesus is, and since they can't get in due to the crowd, they send in a message for Jesus. Jesus is told, *Your mother and brothers are outside, looking for you* (Mark 3.32).

Jesus' response is puzzling. On the surface, he appears to disown his family, for he says, in effect, that his true family consists of those who do God's will — as if that excludes his mother and brothers. I don't believe that's what he meant, though. Rather, he meant to point out that his family was much larger than just the people who were biologically related to him. It included not only his mother, brothers, and sisters, but everyone who took their relationship with God seriously, and did their best to live in God's ways — including the people who were crowded around him in that house that day. When it came to family, then, Jesus saw a bigger picture than just his blood relatives.

Even though Jesus' immediate family apparently played no role in his ministry, they did come around eventually; for, as we heard in the Ascension story three weeks ago, his mother and brothers were part of the group of his disciples and followers who stuck together in Jerusalem following his return to heaven. Indeed, Jesus' brother James — presumably the oldest of his brothers — became one of the leaders of the congregation in Jerusalem. He's mentioned a few times in the Book of Acts, and is even mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, where he refers to him as *James, the Lord's brother* (Galatians 1.19). So, in reflecting on this story, it's important to realize that Jesus wasn't disowning his family; rather, he was seeing a bigger picture — a family that included everyone who loves God and seeks to live in God's ways.

This idea of a “bigger picture” is found also in today's reading from the Letters, in which Paul speaks of the faith that sustains him when he experiences difficulties and hardships in his apostolic ministry. He speaks of those hardships in the verses immediately preceding today's reading. He says of himself and his associates, *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not de-*

stroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be revealed in our body (2 Corinthians 4.8-10).

The reason that Paul is not discouraged by the hardships he and his associates experience is that they always keep in mind the resurrection of Jesus — and, with it, the hope of their own resurrection, and the life of the age to come. He says, ... *we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus, and present us with you to himself* (2 Corinthians 4.14). This hope, then, sustains him as he experiences hardships and dangers in the present. As he puts it, ... *our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen; for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal* (2 Corinthians 4.17-18).

In other words, Paul sees a bigger picture than just the things that are going on in the present. In comparison to that bigger picture, the troubles he experiences in the present seem “light and momentary”.

Today’s readings, then, challenge and encourage us, as people of God in our own day, to see a bigger picture than what we actually see physically, and to live our lives in light of that bigger picture, not just the small picture that we see physically. In that bigger picture, we are part of a much larger family than just the people we’re related to; we are part of the family of God — all those who love God, believe in Jesus, and strive to live in God’s ways. In that bigger picture also, the troubles and hardships we experience in the present pale in comparison with the life that awaits us in the kingdom of God in the age to come. Seeing that bigger picture gives us the encouragement we need to keep us from sinking into despair.

It’s a lot like the situation in which we find ourselves in the current pandemic. For over a year, now, we’ve been observing all kinds of restrictions on our activities in order to keep ourselves and others safe from the COVID-19 virus. But what sustains us through this whole ordeal is the confidence that this pandemic will not go on for ever. Eventually, it will be brought under control. Eventually, we will be able to get together again. Eventually, we will be able to travel again. Eventually, children and young people will be able to go to school again, without the prospect of having to switch to online learning at any time, and be able to take part in extra-curricular activities. Eventually, the pressure on the health care system will ease off. If we keep our eyes on this bigger picture, we can put up with the stresses and inconveniences of the present.

As people of God, then, let us keep our eyes on the bigger picture — on reality not as it looks to us, but as it looks to God. And may that bigger picture have a positive effect on the way we think and act.

HYMN: Love divine all loves excelling ...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Faithful and loving God:

We give you thanks that you came into the world in the person of Jesus, and that in him, you experienced life within a human family, with all of its joys and challenges. We give you thanks that, through his saving work, you offer us human beings adoption into a much larger family — your worldwide family. Grant us wisdom and guidance, then, we pray, as we seek to honor our responsibilities to both our individual families and yours. Through the influence of the Holy Spirit, enable us to value our fellow members in both families, and to treat them with respect, love, and compassion. As your adopted children, enable us always to look beyond the immediate issues, concerns, and difficulties we face in life to the vision of what you are planning to bring about in the long term, and thus to be guided, motivated, and encouraged by that long-term vision.

We pray for people in positions of leadership and authority within your family on earth; and today we pray in particular for the General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church in Canada, as it meets this evening and for the next three days. Inspire and guide the commissioners, we pray, as they make decisions on both routine and difficult matters. Help them to listen to each other, and enable them to discern and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as they discuss the recommendations made in the various reports, and come to their decisions. We pray also for stamina for the moderator, clerks, committee conveners, and commissioners as they deal with the challenges of meeting online rather than in person. We thank you for the technology that enables them to meet in this way, and we pray that it may work smoothly.

We pray for members of our two congregations and others close to us who are experiencing challenges, difficulties, and setbacks of various kinds; in particular, those whom we now name before you in silence: _____. In your love and compassion, reach out to each one, we pray, to provide for their needs, and to grant them strength, guidance, or healing. Help us *also* to be conscious of the needs of the people around us, and to respond to those needs as the Spirit prompts and enables us to.

Hear also our prayers for the world around us. We were saddened this past week to hear the news of the unmarked graves of children that were found at the former Residential School in Kamloops. We give thanks that this discovery corroborates what Indigenous people have been saying all along, and we pray that it may prompt the federal government to provide the necessary funding to search for the graves of children at other Residential School sites across the country. We pray also for those for whom this discovery has re-awakened painful memories, that they may receive the support and assistance they need. We pray that the Roman Catholic Church may be led to acknowledge and apologize for its role in the Residential School system, as other churches have already done. We pray that this discovery may help to educate the general public about the realities of the Residential School system, and that it may give further impetus to the process of reconciliation between white and Indigenous peoples. At the same time, we pray for the federal government's plan to respond to the findings of the Inquiry into Missing

and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. We pray that specific actions may be taken, with clear lines of responsibility, definite deadlines, and sufficient funding.

We continue to pray about the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We give thanks that numbers here in Manitoba are starting to go down, and we pray that the latest restrictions that have been placed on us may have the desired effect. We give thanks again for people in the health care system who are overwhelmed by the task of caring for the sick, and we pray that you would continue to give them strength, guidance, and stamina for their work. We give thanks that vaccines continue to be made available, and that more and more people are now eligible for their second dose. We give thanks for everyone involved in the vaccination effort, and today we give special thanks for the role that pharmacists across the country are playing in fighting the pandemic. We pray once again for students and teachers, for whom the pandemic has created their own challenges and difficulties; and we pray for those who will have to continue doing their teaching and learning online for the rest of the school year, that you would give them strength for the particular challenges that go along with that.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

OFFERING:

Let us then give something back to God
in gratitude for everything he has given to us —
let's present to him our tithes and offerings.

DOXOLOGY: To the great One-in-Three ...

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Gracious and generous God:

We give you thanks for the privilege of belonging to your family, a privilege procured for us by Jesus, in his death and resurrection. We give you thanks also for your long-range purpose for the world, which gives us hope and encouragement as we face difficulties in the present. And we give you thanks for your daily blessings, by which you sustain and enrich our lives.

In gratitude, we present our offering to you, then, which we set apart to be used to support the work that your church does for you in the world. Guide and prosper that work, we pray, so that it may contribute to the working-out of your purpose.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

HYMN: Forth in thy name, o Lord, I go

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue living as members of the family of God,
sustained by God's long-range purpose for the world.

And may God bless you:

May he guide and equip you to do what pleases him,

and may he sustain you in all your difficulties;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.