

Sick of Religion?: Family Squabbles

Mark 3:7-10

We've spent the last few weeks in a series called Sick of Religion. Because the reality is, a lot of our society is just that: sick of religion. They see religion as dated, boring, full of rules, and judgements. But what we've found in our study of this portion of Mark is that Jesus sick of religion too! For the last few weeks, we've seen Jesus shake up the religious order by challenging laws on ceremonial cleanliness and sabbath observance. He's redefined the definition of righteous and who has the power to forgive sins. Jesus was being a bit of a pot stirrer and he was not making friends with the religious leaders. At the end of our passage from last week in Mark 3:6 we read, "The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." They were so mad that they wanted to kill him!

BUT something he was doing was resonating. Because in our passage today, we see he wasn't the only one who was sick of religion. His popularity was on a meteoric rise. We are entering into a time in the Gospel of Mark that I like to call Jesus Mania. This is Jesus Christ, Superstar. . Everywhere he goes, the crowd follows. Everything he does, the crowd goes wild! He has officially reached Rabbi Rockstar status, complete with an adoring crowd, an entourage, and harsh critics. in our passage today, at this pinnacle of popularity, we see Jesus interact with the crowd, the critic, and the called. Each of these groups was responding to the fundamental question, "Who is this Jesus?" Mark, in his typical rapid-fire pace, gives us these three vivid snapshots of each of these groups. We're going to spend a little bit of time looking at each of these pictures as we seek to answer that same question: Who is this Jesus? Because that same question is as relevant to us today as it was in the 1st century.

Let me read to you from our first snapshot in Mark 3:7-10

⁷ Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea ⁸and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. ⁹And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, ¹⁰for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him.

This is our first snapshot: The crowd.

Let's set the scene: After an intense exchange with the Pharisees, Jesus and his disciples slipped away to a remote location on the sea for what was intended to be a little R&R. But instead of rest, they are followed by a "great crowd." The crowd is like a character in Mark's gospel. It is mentioned over 30 times. And this crowd is a full-on multitude, the biggest one yet. The word that Mark uses for this crowd literally means a "many multitude." They had come from north, south, east and west, from places that were geographically far like Idumea, over 100 miles away, and places that were spiritually far like Tyre and Sidon the pagan port cities to the north. This was not a respectable crowd, they were rowdy, and rambunctious, trying to get as close to Jesus as possible. The disciples had a boat ready for an escape plan so he wouldn't get crushed!

The image of the crowd is different than what we picture in our minds. When I picture crowds interacting with Jesus, I have this image of them serenely listening to his teaching. But the snapshot Mark gives us is of a

very different crowd. Remember this is Jesus Mania. It looks a bit more like a celebrity being followed by fans! It looks more like this.

But why did they come? How did someone from over a 100 miles away know to come see Jesus? There was no twitter, facebook, or phones, but the things that Jesus was doing were SO incredible, that word had spread about this teacher/healer/prophet/maybe he was even the Messiah. . .they had heard all that he was doing, and they came to see him.

You can almost hear word spreading, "I heard he touched and healed a leper. I heard some he healed some guy because his friends dug a hole in a stranger's roof and lowered him in. I heard he hangs out with tax collectors." They had to see for themselves. *They came because they were curious.* They had to see if the stories were true. Some came because they heard he could heal people with just a touch, they were curious to see if he was the answer, if they could just brush up against him, they might be healed. Some came for the spectacle, to see these miracles, to have a little brush up with fame. They came for what they could get out of the experience. Even if it meant crushing Jesus in the process. Their answer to the question "Who is this Jesus?" was "I don't know, but I hear he puts on a good show." And admission is free.

It's easy to be critical of this group, content with just the show. We feel a little offended for our Savior that he was roughed up by the multitude. We say things like "This was the same crowd that shouted nailed him to the cross!" How fickle, how dare they! But throughout Mark's gospel we see Jesus use spectacular actions that attract crowds, to reveal his identity. Mark's gospel is sometimes referred to as the Gospel of Miracles because so much of the narrative features the Miraculous. Jesus uses miraculous action to show his authority and to give evidence of that "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." Mark 1:15 Healing the sick was evidence of that kingdom!

In our modern context, Our feathers get a little ruffled at this idea of church as a spectacle. We tsk the people who ask for a sign, or a miracle, who don't want to sit and listen to Jesus. And while I am not satisfied with people just brushing up to Jesus, when I think about the people in my life that need healing, need a miracle, I get the desperation of the crowd. You better believe I want to elbow my way to the front of the crowd to bring them to Jesus. And when I think of my friends that think my love of Jesus is some weird curiosity, I'll do anything to get them through those doors. Bring on Confetti canons, crank up the music, let's put on a God centered spectacle! I want it to feel like Jesus Mania in here. Because I want them to see the spectacular God we serve! I want them to see the miraculous thing that he's doing right here at Chapel Hill, ushering in his Kingdom come in Gig Harbor and Port Orchard and throughout our region. We have to remember we were all curious once. It takes a decision for Jesus to become a disciple of Jesus!

And I know that there will be critics of this approach. Jesus had his own bunch of critics. Let's look at them in our next snapshot in Mark 3.

Snapshot #2

²⁰ Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind." And then jumping down to verse 31

³¹ And his mother and his brothers came and standing outside they sent to him and called him. ³² And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." ³³ And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" ³⁵ For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus was at his peak popularity, and his number 1 critics were those closest to him, his family. The two run-ins with his family in Mark 3 are the first mention of his relatives in Mark's gospel. Remember, there is no Christmas story in Mark. No virgin Mary visited by angels and shepherds and wise men. No Joseph standing by her side. Mark begins when Jesus' ministry begins. And these first mentions of Jesus' family are a little bit awkward. He's surrounded by people, and his family trying to stop him from teaching, even saying he was out of his mind. It would be like if my dad popped up at the 9:00 service (tomorrow) and tried to stop me from preaching.

For the 1st century Jew, family was the central social institution. Identity wasn't tied to the individual; it was tied to the family a person came from. One's standing in society, even profession was based on and dictated by family ties. The honor of a family was tied to a person's public reputation. If a person did something wrong, it brought shame and potential rejection to the entire family. Because of this, families were bound by social contract and obligation.

And here we have Jesus. He'd left the family carpentry business to be a travelling preacher. He had made powerful enemies in the religious elite. He hung out with sinners, broke sabbath laws, touched unclean people, allowed himself to be jostled by crowds of people from who knows where with all kinds of diseases. And each miraculous touch of a leper or dinner with a tax collector was damaging for the family as a whole. As parents, we sometimes say things to our kids like "I'm doing this for your own good." Jesus' family was saying, "We're doing this for your own good, and for our own good too!" They said, "You're bringing us all down, you must be crazy!" Their attempt to silence Jesus was as much for their own survival as his! Their answer to the question, "Who is this Jesus?" was "He's my kooky brother, and he's not doing what he's supposed to!"

Again, we give these critics a hard time. How dare they call our Jesus crazy. In their minds, he wasn't doing what he was supposed to do. But by trying to seize him, and stop him, partly for his own safety and partly for their family reputation, Jesus family was hindering him from doing God's will. And he wouldn't allow it!

And we're not unlike those close critics of Jesus. We want the feel good parts of faith, but when we are challenged with the uncomfortable or the difficult. And when life doesn't go how we expected. We start to critique. We say, Jesus isn't doing what he's supposed to!

When I was 28 weeks pregnant with my oldest daughter, I found out that she had an incurable brain anomaly. After losing four babies and leaving a life we loved, a life we felt called to, in Afghanistan, this was our last effort at a viable pregnancy. And when the doctors told me that my baby would be born with significant brain damage, that she might not even survive it felt like more than I could handle. I became the crowd and the critic. One day, I would be desperate for Jesus to heal, the next I would find myself saying, "I'm done. This isn't what I signed up for. Jesus must be crazy expecting me to go through this." But God spoke to me through his word, after calming the sea in Mark 4, Jesus asks the disciples, "Why are so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And could feel him saying, "Trust me. Trust me." And it's not easy. I sat with my arms crossed and my jaw clenched last weekend when Pastor Ellis preached on sabbath playing the critic again, mumbling to myself, "he's crazy to think a special needs parent can take day of rest. My days off are spent battling with insurance, scheduling appointments. If being on hold with the pharmacy is considered a sabbath, that's all I can give you." And all of God's special needs parents said Amen! But it has been amazing to see the unexpected richness that has come from trusting God, the way the Holy Spirit has been my comforter, the way God's guided Joey and me through difficult decisions, the way I've learned to slow down my pace, notice the everyday spectacular things God is doing. If my daughter hadn't been born with hydrocephalus, I don't think I'd be standing here today. In fact I don't like to think about where I would be, because I think it would be far from here and him. God is using the thing that I thought was a mistake to bless me and to challenge me, to show me community, family, right here.

And here's the thing: Jesus should have dropped everything when he heard his family was there, especially when his mother showed up. Instead, he redefines the very idea of family. He says, "Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." This statement was revolutionary! He was saying who you are related to, where you come from, your standing in this social hierarchy, it does not make a difference in your spiritual condition. More than that, he is saying that his is made up of people who do God's will. The family of God are the ones who are called by God. Who are willing to trust their very lives to him.

But what does it look like to be part of this family? Family identity is typically marked by similarity in traits and mannerism. I get mistaken for my sister all the time, and she lives on the other side of the world! This new family that Jesus was calling was diverse and different. The disciples were a group of people that didn't belong, in society or with each other. We have our Tax Collector, Matthew who was an enemy of the Jews, and our Zealot, Simon who was part of an fanatical anti-Roman group. Fishermen, loud Sons of Thunder. They weren't qualified, educated, or wealthy, and yet they are who Jesus called to be part of his family. This completely unqualified group. And we'll see in the upcoming weeks that they really were unqualified, they really did fumble and stumble. We'll find ourselves giving the disciples a hard time, just like we gave the crowd and the critics a hard time.

At this point in the narrative, the disciples might have answered the question, "Who is this Jesus?" by saying, "I'm not entirely sure, but I am going to follow him with my life."

He is calling us to be with him, because when we are with him, we become more like him. And the more time I spend with my church family, the more I look like Jesus. Part of being a family is being together. We have family dinner every Sunday night with any family that's in town. And if I was the only person to show up, it wouldn't be family dinner. It would just be dinner. I'd still get to eat. But I wouldn't find out my great-great aunt was a world traveling professional whistler. And probably more applicable to this context, I wouldn't get to watch as my dad points out his favorite verses in my daughters new 2nd grade bible. It's when we are with our family that we learn to be like our family. In community, we see what it looks like to be obedient to God. When we encourage church attendance, it's not because we want a full seating capacity (although that sure is fun), it's because we want to be with our family of faith! And again, I don't challenge you to share your faith because I want more people to show up at Alpha. I want to see people move from outside of the church, the family of Jesus, into belonging. And that will be accomplished by us living out our discipleship together as the family of God.

God entered into the human family through Jesus. We were the disobedient children, not deserving of God's love. Our brother, Jesus laid down his life as a perfect sacrifice so that we might be right with God. We're marching towards Easter. Jesus died at the behest of the religious leaders, at the hands of the Romans, with the shouts of the crowd, and denials of relationship from his disciples, his family might have been ashamed by him, but he was humiliated for us. And in his death he defeated death, he conquered the grave. He rose. This is moment where need cannons. This is the moment we need to celebrate. He is not ashamed to call sinners his brother! Jesus is not ashamed to call me, a sinner, a part of his family. We are the family of God!

I recognize that we have people here today who answer that question "Who is Jesus" in a lot of different ways. I want you to walk out of here today answering two questions: Who is this Jesus? And what is he calling me to? And as the Director of Next Steps, I am going to give you a couple ideas. If you are curious, come for the show. I'd like to invite you to keep coming. On April 24th we'll start another Alpha course, it's a great place for those who are curious to explore who Jesus is. Or you might be a critic, feeling like Jesus isn't who you expected him to be. I'd love to invite you to try Celebrate Recovery on Wednesday night. It's a great place to find community and healing, and transformation. If you know who Jesus is to you, he is your Lord, your friend, your brother, remember that we are being called from one degree of glory to the next. Being a disciple of Jesus is a continued journey of worship, connecting to the community of Christ, and

service. Maybe that looks like joining the family at Chapel Hill, or developing community or inviting your neighbor to come to Alpha with you. For me, it's taken up last week's challenge and figuring out how I can make time for sabbath, because my soul needs it. Maybe it's inviting a friend to Alpha. Story. We are seeing people move from curious to called.

When we are tempted to judge the curious, or the critic, or even the unqualified called, we should remember that Jesus called the disciples from the crowd. They all started out curious. And his critical brothers became leaders in the early church. The books of James and Jude were written by Jesus' earthly brothers. Jesus trusted his legacy to the unqualified called. 11 of the disciples would become apostles, the leaders in the early church, 10 of them dying for their faith. That family legacy lives on is us today who are called to be obedient to God's will.