

“When a House Becomes a Home”

2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1, Mark 3: 20–35

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Jesus entered a house. A crowd gathered again so that it was impossible for him and his followers even to eat. When his family heard what was happening, they came to take control of him. They were saying, “He is out of his mind!” The legal experts came down from Jerusalem. Over and over they charged, “He is possessed by Beelzebul. He throws out demons with the authority of the ruler of demons.”

When Jesus called them together, he spoke to them in parables.

“How can Satan throw out Satan? A kingdom involved in civil war will collapse. And a house torn apart by divisions will collapse. If Satan rebels against himself and is divided, then he cannot endure. He is done for. No one gets into the house of a strong person and steals anything without first tying up the strong person. Only then can the house be burglarized. I assure you that human beings will be forgiven for everything, for all sins and insults of every kind. But whoever insults the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness. That person is guilty of a sin with consequences that last forever. He said this because the legal experts were saying, “He is possessed by an evil spirit.

His mother and brothers arrived. They stood outside [the house] and sent word to him, calling for him. 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.

Best movie ever: Wizard of Oz: “There’s no place like home.” We yearn for a place of home. A place of sweetness. A place of simplicity. Acceptance. Peace. Until you remember: in the Wizard of Oz, there is no peace! It’s defined by the tornado! And by the way, Dorothy’s parents are nowhere to be found! How’s that for no place like home? All she had was a grumpy aunt, a bumbling, incompetent uncle, some goofy farmhands, and wandering snake oil salesman who pretends to be a Wizard! A bunch of incompetents by anyone’s measure. Somehow, in the tornado of Dorothy’s legalistic, angry, vengeful world it is the incompetents who make her feel safe and at home. Maybe that is a good image to start warming us up to think about this encounter with Jesus and his family.

Jesus’ family is on their way to come to get him because they are absolutely convinced. He may be Jesus, but he’s crazy! I hope you can picture it: the family on the road to come get him. Grumbling the whole way.

His brother, a carpenter, saying, "Yup, I believe Brother Jesus is a half-bubble off plumb. His Sister, civil engineer, "Big brother's butter done slipped off his biscuit?" The siblings are trading jokes like: How does a crazy person travel in the woods? They take the psycho path. Mother Mary, gentle, but truthful. She rationalizes, he's a good boy, but he's been working too hard. Bless his heart. His potato salad has been out in the sun too long.

Crazy Jesus: that's what his family is saying. Inside the bracket: The legal experts said: He's possessed! Taken over the prince of demons! Jesus called the legalists together and told them maybe it was one parable, or maybe what we have is a series of portions of parables. Remember, a Parable take everyday situations, and give a twist with hyperbole, improbability, surprise and shock. A parable does that thing we hate to do. It makes us think differently.

And then the parable says, you saw that flash of a new world: didn't you. Now you have to decide: Are you going to live in the old world or the new? Parables elicit thought and require decision. They are designed to goad people into change. You know that baseball Pitcher, Nolan Ryan? His classic quote: It helps if the hitter thinks you're a little crazy. Jesus keeps throwing these crazy pitches at them Called parables. Jesus says: If Satan is bad, and I'm Satan, but I'm tossing out Satan, then am I OK now? If you lawyers say I'm Satan, and I'm tying up Satan, Then does that mean I'm stronger than Satan? Are you giving me a compliment? Jesus made their little pointy heads hurt.

Hyperbole, improbability, shock and surprise. Creative use of language and imagery. We have a tendency to worry about that part in the passage that mentions the unforgiveable sin. It makes us uncomfortable because Crazy Jesus turns into angry Jesus. The problem with our normal interpretation is that we have a tendency to switch gears: And all of a sudden make Jesus a literalist. According to this way of reading, it goes: Parable, parable, parable, law?!!! I would like to suggest instead that we stick with the flow. Or is it parable, parable, parable, parable?

If the unforgiveable sin is a parable. Like being born again. Jesus is creatively shocking them to realize, Not that God has judged them, damned them forever. Rather that they, in their internal attitude, have cut themselves off from the spirit of God. God won't force them to open themselves to God. These people, who are all about judgment, anger, and condemnation will end up cutting themselves off From Jesus. Which is to say, from God. It is not that God excludes them, but that they have cut themselves off from God.

The passage focuses on the word "Forgiveness." Forgiveness is an internal attitude that opens us up to others and to the world. Without forgiveness, grace, we judge and exclude. The legalists are not interested in that other world. They are happy with a spirit of judgment, anger, and exclusion.

I would like you to notice one interesting thing. To study this Scripture passage, it starts out with a paragraph about Jesus' family. Then there are parables in between. Then it ends with a paragraph about Jesus old and new family. In our anger/legalistic, are we cutting ourselves off from our someone whom we ought to recognize as family? Forgiveness is mentioned in the text: will not be forgiven. Jesus attitudes bring people together.

Our legalistic thinking can tear our family apart. Our legalistic thinking can tear our spiritual family apart. Whoever insults the Holy Spirit will tear themselves apart. The legal experts were tearing the spiritual family apart. Legal experts were tearing themselves apart. It is a warning to anyone. The family can be torn apart. Just decide that those new ideas are crazy, and you never have to open up.

His mother and brothers arrived, calling for him. Instead, Jesus looks at his followers: Interesting: at this beginning of this story, they are described as a “crowd” that is so chaotic, Jesus and his disciples can’t even eat. Now, after spending time with Crazy Jesus, they are sitting in a circle around him. No hierarchy, but plenty of order. They are in a perfect symbol of community. In the presence of Jesus, they move from chaos to community.

Jesus redefines them, he intensifies the image (like a parable.) This crowd, they are like his family: Whoever does God’s will, they are my family. Jesus entered a house, he turned it into a home. Not part of biological family, not part of our social strata. Break down the barriers: make family. Transcends the tribalism.

Crazy: to hang out with the poor, to reach out and touch someone who has leprosy or AIDS. Crazy to be so gifted, but not turn it into a lucrative career. Crazy to spend your life trying to change minds. Just when you get things going, leave and go someplace else.

No matter how much someone else tries to exile and exclude us, Jesus is there to welcome us home. We human beings hunger for the approval and acceptance of others. On the one hand, we play the role of excluders. On the other hand, we end up being excluded. No matter how much others try to cut us out of the family, No matter how self-orphaned we may make ourselves, Jesus welcomes us home.

We are so hungry for the respect of others, we are tempted to take our identity out of the hands of God and put it in the hands of others. Others who judge us in a thousand ways. Your job fails, Someone else takes your place, the insults come and soak in, and you end up not getting that raise you needed desperately. You do not have enough experience, or you have too much experience and too many wrinkles. Not living up to expectations. You are out.

Your mother, your brothers and sisters: want to take you out of this place. Too many strange people. Jesus goes into a house – he turns it into a home. Come home to church. Stop trying to prove yourself worthy. Church is where people who thought they were nobodies find out Who they are – priceless. (William Sloane Coffin, vol. 2, pp. 60-62)

C.S. Lewis described what can be expected if one becomes a Christian: “Imagine yourself as a living house.” God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof, and so on. But presently, he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense.

What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of, throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards.

You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage. But he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself." (Quote from Wm Sloane Coffin, Vol. 1, p. 245).

The world is trying to make God so small. Perhaps that is why the world needs churches like the House of Hope: To stretch our hearts, to open our minds, and to strengthen our souls." And to make sure we know there is room, plenty of room, for all sorts of people.

There is a movie that opens next week, starring the most famous Presbyterian Minister since John Calvin – Mr. Rogers. Opened in 1967: he saw how humor in children's programs came by denigrating someone's dignity through pratfalls and cartoonish violence – there is a trajectory that leads to, say, today's cable news.

In a day when in many states, blacks and whites could not swim in the same pool, on a hot day in the neighborhood, Mr. Rogers invites his black mail man To take off his shoes, and soak his feet with him in his kiddie pool. The message is gentle but unmistakable. Everybody was welcome in Mr. Roger's neighborhood.

Article in Vox: sets the record straight: "There is confusion that marks public discourse today, in which kindness far too often is decried as weakness, courtesy as political correctness run amok, respect as pandering, and belief in each individual's dignity and worth as narcissism..... It seems as if ordinary, old-fashioned goodness has gone out of fashion."

Maybe Jesus's mother, his brothers and sisters had been listening to the wrong news stories. We do that same sort of water thing here: we call it baptism. There are all sorts of church traditions regarding baptism. Some churches do a little family ritual.

I had some friends who wanted me to come over to their backyard On a Sunday afternoon with a few close friends and family. They said they wanted me there to christen their baby. I said, I could christen their boat, but not their baby. You see, we Presbyterians pretty much only baptize in worship. Because for us, it is a ritual: It is a foretaste of the family of God at the end of time: So to get ready for that day at our baptisms today, we have to invite the whole family of God. And God has all these strange relatives. Including me.

It is a moment: when we feel Jesus speaking to us: Who is my mother? Who are my sisters and brothers? Whoever does the will of God. That is my family. Whoever! When we recognize that, no matter where we are, we make that house a home. It makes us want to change the world.

I met a young man. This is a long time ago in a land far, far away. His boss told him he was sorry, but business was way down, and he had to let him go. But, the boss said, you are welcome to use the computer here, the phone, the copier, anything you need to help you until you get another job. I told that story in church. Afterwards, a businessman came up and gave me a good dressing down that

such business practices were not good business, it was naive, and I should not tell such unrealistic stories in church.

I appreciated his attempt to guide me. I did not have the heart to tell him, that although it was unrealistic, the generous boss in the story had been sitting in the pew in front of him that morning. His name was Ed. I always liked Ed. He made his large business a home. But then, you know people like that too, don't you?

The Great Harvest Bread Company on Selby. It looks like a bakery: Bonnie Alton sees it as a place to create community. In a mixed income neighborhood, anyone who is hungry who comes through the door knows they are going to be offered a slice of homemade bread. Over the course of nearly 25 years, she has provided first-time employment to hundreds of young people. And generously supported countless non-profit organizations. Bonnie has made a bakery a home. There is no place like home. And Jesus is the crazy one, who lets us know we can survive the tornados of life and be welcomed home.

God calls us to a life not of loneliness and exclusion, But to a life of community. Human beings are not created for isolation. We are created for community.

Kennon Callahan talks about living in a world where people feel the stress of modern life, having a sense of anomie. With the pace, the speed, the crowdedness, and yet the isolation, disorientation, and loneliness. They have left behind family and friends. Put themselves in position of world where identity comes from a business that has no loyalty to them, and they have no loyalty to it.

There is no lasting bond. They have no bond. We need to belong. We long to belong. To share stories, to share goals to share values. To carry on traditions together. To experience a sense of God's presence together. To share together a vision for the future. So how have you felt that sense of family here? How has the House of Hope become a Home of Hope for you? Where have you reached out?

If you have not felt that, maybe God is calling you to take the initiative. To make this house more of your home by taking the risk of reaching out to make new friends. I'd like to tell you about a guy who was born about a hundred years ago. His name was Thomas Dorsey. Thomas left school to become a professional pianist at age 12. In his early 20s, Thomas moved to Chicago. He played, sang, and published blues compositions under the name "Georgia Tom." One critic described Dorsey as "the most... serious, and accomplished blues lyricist of his time." In 1925 Thomas married Nettie Harper. A year later, he experienced a nervous breakdown. For two years he was unable to work. To survive, his wife took a job in a laundry to support them. His sister-in-law encouraged him to go to church. Finally Thomas went to a worship service where he experienced what is best termed a spiritual healing.

It moved Thomas to commit himself more fully to God and Christian music. A few years later, he became the choir director of Chicago's Pilgrim Baptist Church. When the Great Depression struck, Thomas believed his songs lifted people Out of despair, and gave them hope." In August of 1932, Thomas and his pregnant wife were living in a little apartment on Chicago's South Side. He was

invited to be the featured soloist at a large revival in St. Louis. Thomas kissed Nettie goodbye and made his way to St. Louis.

The next night, as soon as he finished playing, a message came to him up on the stage. He ripped open the envelope, and on the yellow sheet were the words: "Your wife just died." Thomas remembered that surreal moment. People were happily singing and clapping around him, but he was devastated. Racing home, he learned that Nettie had given birth to a boy. "I swung between grief and joy," he recalled. But that night he lost the child too. When the visitation and funeral were over Thomas withdrew from family, friends, and even his music. He felt that God had done him an injustice. He didn't want to serve him anymore or write gospel songs.

In the midst of despair, a friend visited Dorsey and arranged for him to be left alone in a room with a piano. Thomas said: "It was quiet; the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows." For the first time in many days, he sat at a piano using his fingers flow over the keys. Soon, he had an experience. "I felt at peace. I felt as though I could reach out and touch God. I found myself playing a melody, one I'd never heard or played before, and words [for "Precious Lord"] came into my head—they just seemed to fall into place."

*Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, help me stand;
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light; Take my hand,
precious Lord, lead me home."*

Jesus finds a way to take all God's children, even those in the house of despair, to turn a house into a home.

Whomever. No matter how apart we may feel, Jesus leads us – home.

Amen.