



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANNON RICHARD C. WEYLS, CATHEDRAL CANON & ASSOCIATE TO THE RECTOR
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 9, 2024
GENESIS 3:8-15; PSALM 130; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-5:1; MARK 3:20-35

PROUD TO BE HIS FAMILY

Mark 3:20-35 [*The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.” Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”]*

It was May of 1968. I was preparing for my First Holy Communion in the Roman Catholic Church. In my family and in the Catholic ghetto where I lived, this was a big deal. I was excited about being recognized as a “little more grown up” in the church. In my family, once someone celebrated First Communion, one was required to attend Mass each Sunday, pay attention, sing the songs, and join in the assembly responses.

Yes, I was excited about this, but I was even more excited about my First Communion party. My parents were hosting the bash that included me and my two cousins who were also in the second grade in my Catholic school. It was going to be a big do.

Unfortunately, we had a plumbing emergency at our house just a few days before the party. Mr. Rolf, our neighbor, was

a plumber and he and my dad quickly worked to fix all the problems. Mr. Rolf was a lovely, kind man. His son was my best friend. Rolf had a hulking physique and took great interest in my little league baseball team. He was a former baseball player whose career ended when he sustained a serious injury.

I was asked to help my dad and Mr. Rolf with the plumbing repairs. I think that meant standing around and handing them tools when they needed them. I listened attentively to their conversation. They talked and laughed about many things. Suddenly, Mr. Rolf said, "You know that new bar at W. 117th St. and Clifton Avenue?" "Yeah, I think so," my dad said. "It's a limp-wrist bar," said the plumber. "I hope we don't wander into that place by accident!" And they both chuckled uncomfortably.

At eight years old, I had no idea what a "limp-wrist" was, but I picked up on the feelings behind the words. Kids often do. The phrase "limp-wrist" felt like a pejorative term for a group of people. A group that was to be feared with disdain. I remembered that term and the feelings behind it.

It wasn't until I was 14 years old that I learned that "limp-wrist" and many other horrible, hurtful words and phrases referred to gay people or "homosexuals," as they were commonly referred to at the time. As I

learned the meaning of these words, I became aware of my own same-gender romantic attractions. I was confused, not because I was gay, but because I didn't have "limp wrists" at all. In fact, I was an accomplished gymnast, so I had wrists that were much stronger than other boys my age. The term didn't make any sense to me.

Though this was never the intent, I had been socialized to fear and look down upon gay people, and I was one of them. So, I hid and kept this secret to myself for many years. And I felt shame.

From our first reading today: *"I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." God said, "Who told you that you were naked?"*

In the early hours of June 28, 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City. Police raids were not uncommon, but this time, the crowd in the bar and the onlookers on the street resisted. Remember, in the 1960's homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder, and most municipalities in the United States had discriminatory laws that forbade same-sex relationships and denied basic rights to anyone suspected of being gay. Gay bars were safe havens where gay and gender-diverse people could be open about their sexual orientations. But the bars really weren't that safe. Police officers regularly

surveilled and entrapped gay men; they raided gay bars on pretexts that ranged from “disorderly conduct” to a variety of minor liquor license infractions. The Stonewall Inn was grubby and barely legal. Its patrons were among the most marginalized members of New York’s LGBTQ+ community—including underaged and unhoused individuals, people of color, and drag performers.

“This club was more than a dance bar, more than just a gay gathering place,” wrote Dick Leitsch, the first gay journalist to document the events. “It catered largely to a group of people who are not welcome in, or cannot afford, other places of homosexual social gathering.”ⁱ It was a place where the most marginalized members of society could get in, be accepted, and belong.

In our Gospel today, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth. His public ministry has begun, and he is a popular teacher and wonderworker. Just picture it. Huge crowds of people follow him and gather in the home where he is staying. I imagine the crowds pressing in so tightly that he can barely lift his hand to feed himself. This commotion causes alarm among his family and the local religious authorities. Jesus is accused of being insane. His mother, Mary, and other family members stand outside the crowded house, calling to him, hoping in vain to

“restrain” him. The religious leaders arrive and declare that Jesus is evil and a threat to their religious sensibilities. They claim he is possessed by “the ruler of the demons.” Crazy and possessed? Now that’s pretty bad.

The Jesus of Mark’s Gospel is not a cuddly and compassionate Jesus. He shreds the arguments of the scribes with clever parables and accuses them of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – an “unforgiveable” sin. Instead of greeting his family, he rejects their interventions, renounces their claims on his life, and trades them in for a new family of his own making.

Jesus *redefines his own identity* and his relationships to others. He starts a revolution. He rejects expectations and cultural norms and situates everything within God, namely, hearing and responding to God’s will makes us deeply related to one another. This is what makes us family.

Let’s return to the scene of the action. Outside the house are the INSIDERS – Jesus’ family, the religious leaders, the pious, the careful. They think they have God all figured out. They think they know what the Holy Spirit is supposed to look like, and it ain’t Jesus. Inside the house are society’s OUTSIDERS – the marginalized, the misfits, the rejects, the tax collectors, and prostitutes. These are the folks who have responded to

Jesus' preaching and are following him as disciples. These are the ones that society has judged to be sick, insane, and deviant --- they are the hungry, the unorthodox, the unwashed. And who is in the midst of them? **Jesus.** He sits among them teaching, "This. *This* is my family."

If we're not shaken by this, then we're not paying attention. Jesus isn't calling for superficial change here; he's dividing the house. He's burning things down. He's going for deep, institutional, and systemic change. Outside is in, and inside is out, and the people who are least likely to get it are the ones who consider themselves to be the most spiritually enlightened and stable. This is the Pentecost experience that we are celebrating in this season. This is God's wild, disturbing, and unpredictable Spirit found in Jesus that the religious leaders called insane and demon possessed. It's a reminder for us to be careful about our enshrined certainties.

During Pride month we remember the response of a disenfranchised group of outsiders, the most powerless in an already marginalized community, who resisted

during an unjust police raid. The so-called *Stonewall Rebellion* helped spark the modern LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

Through Jesus, those on the outside have been invited in. The insiders find themselves on the out unless they are willing to hear and follow the promptings of God's Spirit. And what is it like to be inside that house with Jesus? I think we all know of it. For we all hunger to belong, to be safe to be who we really are, and to belong to someone who loves us. No matter who we are, we all know what it's like to yearn for someone who can hold all of who we are, and love us still, without flinching. That's exactly what Jesus does for the crowds that day. He invites them in, he asks them to stay, and he makes them family.

Yes, Jesus divides the house, and that process hurts. But he doesn't divide it to make us homeless. He divides it to rebuild it. To make it more spacious, more welcoming, and more beautiful. The Spirit of God is neither insane nor evil; the Spirit completes the good work Jesus began. His will be a house of healing for the whole world.

¹ What Was the Stonewall Uprising? <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/stonewall-uprising-ignited-modern-lgbtq-rights-movement#:~:text=What%20was%20the%20Stonewall%20uprising,the%20fight%20for%20LGBTQ%20rights.&text=In%201969%20C%20police%20raids%20of,beating%20bar%20staff%20and%20clientele>