

Third Sunday after Pentecost; June 9, 2024
+ Mark 3:20-35 +
“The Stronger Man Prevails”

They went into a house. A crowd gathered again so that they were not even able to eat a meal. When his own people heard this, they went out to take control of him, because they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”

The experts in the law who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebub,” and, “He drives our demons by the ruler of demons.”

Jesus called them together and spoke to them in parables. “How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand but is finished. On the other hand, no one can enter a strong man’s house to steal his possessions unless he ties up the strong man first. Then he can plunder his house. Amen I tell you: Everything will be forgiven people, their sins and whatever blasphemies they may speak. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” Jesus said this because they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Then his mother and brother arrived. While they were standing outside, they sent word to Jesus, calling to him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you.”

He replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” He looked at those who sat around him in a circle and he said, “Look, my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

All of us have had what is often called a “bad hair day.” Not necessarily in the literal sense of rebellious hair follicles, but just that sort of day where very little seems to go your way. When was the last time you had a day like that? For sinners like you and me, days like that can be good in at least one way: they are humbling; they remind us of our limitations and prevent us from falling in love with life in this world.

Even as God in the flesh, there are days during his ministry where it even seems like Jesus is dealing with Murphy’s Law. It really couldn’t be, of course, since nothing ever happens apart from God allowing it, but to our human way of seeing things, today’s lesson from St. Mark’s Gospel account certainly has that appearance, doesn’t it?

First, his family criticizes Him because of the way he manages the crowds: **“He’s out of his mind!”** they conclude; and Mark tells us that they are out to **take control of him**, or forcibly restrain him. And if that isn’t bad enough, then Jesus has a conflict with the religious leaders who have been sent to investigate his preaching, teaching, and working of miracles. Having seen and heard about Jesus’ success with exorcisms, they claim that Jesus, **“has Beelzebub”**— that he is possessed by The Lord of the Flies, Satan. They claim he is casting out demons by the power of the boss demon.

So it is double trouble as our Lord is bad-mouthed first by his family, and then the scribes. Think for a moment: how would you react to such opposition and criticism? How well we know the experience of doing all the right things with the best of intentions, only to have it backfire on us! If you’re anything like

me—that is, a flawed, impatient, defensive human being—you probably get upset and want to lash out verbally, or worse.

Prior to what we hear in this Gospel, Jesus has been doing exactly what he came to do: he preaches, he teaches, he heals, and he casts out demons. Such activity attracts the attention of the crowds, and in spite of it being all divine and true, it comes with criticism and rejection.

There are lots of naysayers, folks who have nothing better to do than criticize Jesus and put him down. But Jesus answers his critics with a word about life in his Kingdom, and compares that to how we live in the kingdom of this world: **“If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand but is finished.”**

Simple logic dictates that any human organization or group that is divided against itself, destroys itself. And the same is also true of Satan’s kingdom. Satan will not act against his own interests or restrain his own evil activity. But someone stronger will. To illustrate this, Jesus then tells a parable: **“On the other hand, no one can enter a strong man’s house to steal his possessions unless he ties up the strong man first. Then he can enter and plunder his house.”** I often walk past a brand-new beautiful home on Horner Road. The owner of the house is an immense man. He is at least 6’8”, with quads like tree trunks and biceps that stretch his sleeves. If I were a thief: no matter how desperate I ever became for money or jewels, no matter how certain I am that such a beautiful home was holding them, I would not break into that man’s house. It would be suicide. When thieves break into an occupied home, they pick one with a man weaker than themselves.

It’s a parable that we wouldn’t expect to hear from Jesus; he is in fact comparing himself to a thief who binds up a homeowner. But as always, we must stick to the main point of comparison. The point is that there is a strong man who owns homes, but Jesus is stronger. Jesus has been talking about Satan, so that would be the place to start when we think of the strong man he binds up and plunders. But what Jesus talks about next is the sinners themselves, the people themselves, their sins and blasphemies that need forgiveness. So it’s also right to say that before Jesus moves in to take your heart, you are your own evil strong man. Your own sin and blasphemy dwells in and rules your soul.

I would hope that very few of us give much thought to stealing or plundering someone’s house, but we may well worry about someone stealing from our own. But Jesus is the strong man steals entire homes, entire people, from Satan and sin. He is the one who has bound Satan and our own sin. The moment he triumphed over Satan by the cross was our victory, and when he enters each believer’s heart by faith, the victory is their own. Our Lord couldn’t be clearer: he not only stands in opposition to Satan, he has completely defeated him! Every time someone comes to faith, every time someone is baptized, every time someone is released from bondage to sin, every time sins are confessed and forgiveness is believed, the strong man’s house is being plundered!

There are at least three things to understand here: First, there is a spiritual war or struggle going on this world. Wherever Christ is not believed, Satan still rules. The social ills of our society and community have a spiritual foundation: sin, which creates the violence, despair, and chaos that we see all around us. What we see in the decay of our culture are but symptoms of living under the dominion of the **strong man**. Christians now spend too much time moaning about the symptoms of Satan’s rule, and not enough time praying and evangelizing for Jesus to bind Satan up and drive him out hearts. Speak Christ’s victory over Satan by the cross. Pray: **“Thy kingdom come,”** or **“deliver us from evil [the Evil One],”** because when we

do we are praying for our Lord Jesus Christ to plunder the strong man's house and to prevail against the devil.

Part of our responsibility in being Jesus' disciples is that we will be engaged in the opposition to evil, remembering that while we are called to fight in the battle, the victory is not to our glory, but his! **Unless he [the Christ] ties up the strong man first. Then he can plunder his house.**

Secondly, Jesus assures us of the ultimate outcome. The incarnate Son of the Father has decisively engaged Satan in a fight to the finish. When Satan tempted Jesus every which way in the wilderness to wander from way of the cross, Jesus resisted the devil, went to the cross, and so triumphed over evil.

In living a human life free from sin and then by taking all humanity's punishment on the cross and rising from the dead, Jesus has bound that strong man who comes to steal, kill and destroy. When Jesus proclaimed, "It is finished," from the cross, he declared that everything necessary to save humanity had been done; including the defeat of the devil. Satan may be strong, but Jesus is stronger, and he will not allow the Evil One to prevail over you, or over any of his chosen ones.

And the third thing to remember is this: If our Lord was able to defeat the Strong Man, then he is able to deliver us from evil as well. We need not be subject to the bondage to sin

Whatever disappointments we may have in ourselves, or in our inability to overcome harmful habits or behaviors destructive to our life; our Savior is strong enough to save. God's arm is not so short that it cannot save or deliver, for through the liberating power of the cross, Jesus frees and forgives. We sometimes arrogantly try to run our own house and think we can keep things in order by our own power and strength. Let Jesus have control. You can't do it on your own. But with Christ in you and for you, you can. This is the reality that motivated St. Paul to say, **Consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.**

Our situation as Christians is like the story of a cruel landlord. Suppose that you live in a run-down apartment, because it's the best you can afford. There are holes in the walls and ceiling, the carpet is smelly and threadbare, and there are cockroaches. The windows leak heat in the summer and cold air in the winter, and they let insects in, too. The faucets drip constantly, and the toilet often overflows. Yet the landlord still collects the rent, and when you hesitate to pay, and complain because of the poor conditions, he threatens higher rent. You have nowhere else to live and can't afford anything better, so you keep on paying the rent.

One day, though, you hear a knock at the door. You open it to behold a well-dressed, polite young man who tells you that he has just purchased the building you live in! He asks to inspect the premises, and as he sees what sort of conditions you are living in, he is appalled and promises to make repairs and let you live there for free.

Shortly after he leaves you hear another, harsher knocking on the door. You open it to find your angry old landlord standing there demanding his rent. What do you do? Of course you don't want to pay him, and you don't have to, either. But don't try to fight that jerk yourself. He has more resources than you do. And you don't need to fight himself yourself, either. After all, you live in the building but still are not the owner. What you can do now that your dwelling is under new ownership, and what you should do, is refer him to the new owner. And tell him, "Good luck with that, Jerk."

Satan will continue to harass and intimidate you, but the reality is that the strong man is now bound, powerless over you. The stronger One, who is both God and man, prevails. Thanks be to God for all his blessings, Amen!