

Disordered?

1 Samuel 8:4-20, Mark 3:20-35
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“I need help knowing what to do about the grumpy old men’s class” said the tired voice on the other end of the phone.

My friend is a pastor in Richmond. He had worked with a team of lay leaders for weeks to plan the summer schedule for the church, making plans to switch worship and Sunday school, planning for some in person gatherings and the continuation of virtual worship. After talking with families and folks who had been visiting digitally during COVID and retirees and deacons and the music staff and the pastors, the team had finally worked out all the details but just before my friend walked up to the podium on the Sunday he was going to announce it, he was handed a note saying not to make the announcement because the Old Men’s Class was mad. And not only were they mad but they had convinced someone who had been on the planning team that the outcome was wrong and that they were right. The Sunday School teacher might leave the church, he heard.

I’ve heard about this class before. They feel entitled to be heeded on near ‘bout everything that arises.

Another friend, a pastor in Indiana, is having the same problem with the Ladies’ Bridge Club which seems to be a shadow government for the church. They do a lot of clamoring and a lot of demanding.

A lot of disordered thinking about what it means to be a people of God.

Both texts for today have these clamoring crowds. The clamoring in both instances is largely driven by a disordered understanding of the power and movement of the holy.

The Samuel text begins this way - “then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel” - and what did they say? They fretted, they fretted about Samuel’s age, and the behavior of the young folk, they fretted about needing to make sure that everything was under control - “give us a king to govern us” they begged. The Lord tells Samuel - just give them a king if they want a king. And the Lord invokes the history of the people Israel: I brought them out of Egypt to this very day, and they keep forsaking me and serving other gods.

They are never satisfied. They want the sure protection of more tangible gods. They want a king because other nations have kings. They want to credential themselves with a king. “You are going to be less free, the king will take things away from you that matter to you,” the Lord tells Samuel to tell the people. But they insist that they must have a king, too. They are guided by a disordered thinking about what it means to be a people of God, by a disordered understanding of the power and movement of the holy.

The opening of the Mark passage begins with a clamoring crowd, and the text says, “when his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” This is such a disorienting start to a story that it almost mimics what it must have been

like to be in such a crowd. Reading those lines, I was not entirely sure who “he” was, and I couldn’t guess what must have happened in the previous paragraphs.

It was shocking, shocking I tell you.

Jesus appointed the twelve apostles.

Perhaps what came even earlier in the chapter is more relevant. Jesus heals a man on the sabbath, upsetting the old men of the synagogue who immediately begin conspiring against him. But word gets out that Jesus is a healer, and droves of people come down to be near him by the sea of Galilee. They come in great numbers from Judea and Jerusalem and from regions beyond the Jordan River. He cured many people and he tells his disciples to have a boat ready for him because he is afraid he will be crushed. But this same, crushing crowd, comes to his home, driven by a disordered understanding of the power and movement of the holy.

And they accuse HIM of disordered thinking. “He is out of his mind,” they say.

This crowd is being riled up with scandalous assessments by the scribes who have come down from Jerusalem. Jesus is possessed by an evil spirit, they say. This apparent power to heal is evidence of demons, they say. As one of the commentaries on this passage suggested- “Instead of assisting in his ministry, they were an obstacle to it,” (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary on Mark, 128).

And Jesus' response, which is rooted in this connection between physical and mental illness and demons in the ancient world, does two things.

First it challenges the reasoning of those clamoring against him. Jesus essentially says - you say I am casting out demons (healing people) because I am possessed by a demon? That’s utter nonsense. Satan cannot banish Satan, says Jesus. Brokenness cannot rightly cast out brokenness. A house divided against itself cannot stand.

Second, it names this failure to understand his true power “blaspheme.” It is blaspheme to suggest that something that is holy is actually demonic. This clamoring crowd is guided by a disordered thinking about what it means to be a people of God, by a disordered understanding of the power and movement of the holy.

What could all of this talk about the power and movement of the holy have to do with us?

Where do we make space for the holy in our lives?

Is the Holy a decoration for our lives and our worship, something that we dust off from time to time, or is it something that propels us? Where do we make space for holy mystery in our lives?

I’d like to be better about trusting the movement of the spirit. I’d like to better order my thinking when it comes to trusting God, to living into God’s ordering of the world, I’d like to more readily and rightly perceive holy healing, and I’d like to be on guard against this tendency to look for a house divided where there is holy mystery.

I was particularly inspired - or challenged - those ways of responding so often go together - by the assessment in commentary on this Mark passage that relates directly to churches:

The circumstances of the church change from generation to generation. New forms and structures are called for ... Whatever it's form or structures, though, when the church is fulfilling God's purposes for it, the life of the church is marked by meaningful worship, caring nurture and education, evangelistic sharing of the gospel, compassionate and courageous ministry in the name of Jesus, and a fellowship that transcends divisive social barriers."

Our church is in the midst of a beautiful and sweeping story of change from generation to generation. We are tending to new forms and structures that are more inclusive, to processes that are more open, to antiracism, to extravagant welcome, and to being the church that is needed for those who have been formed in a world that is very different from the world in which those who came before us were formed. And our changing, our forming and reforming, can feel disruptive or discombobulating. If our focus is on preserving old ways of doing things, on preserving patterns and structures, then this sort of change might feel like a million deaths over which we must fret and grieve.

But that is not the story of holy mystery. We have the opportunity to perceive our changing, our forming and reforming, as the movement of the holy, propelling us towards new forms and structures so that our life together might be marked by meaningful worship, and formation, and advocacy, and resistance, and a fellowship that transcends divisive social barriers. So that we might be a courageous people, formed by holy mystery, propelled by holy mystery, shedding disordered thinking, and participating in the holy work of changing the systems and communities in which we live.

There is a hymn whispering to me as I sit with this sermon. Here is the first verse:

Called as partners in Christ's service
Called to ministries of grace
We respond with deep commitment
Fresh new lines of faith to trace
May we learn the art of sharing
Side by side and friend with friend
Equal partners in our caring
To fulfil God's chosen end.

Family of God, may we live and move as partners in the ministry of Jesus rather than as obstacles to it. May we order our thinking about what it means to be a people of God, may we rightly perceive the power and movement of the holy. Family of God, may we be changed by the One with the power to make us whole.

So may it be.