

What Binds Us?  
St. Mark 3:20-25

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus finds himself embroiled in disagreement and debate. As early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of St. Mark's gospel Jesus is in trouble, not just with the religious and political leaders but also with his disciples and even his immediate family.

He is in trouble because he confronts tradition, opposes authority, and competes with his family. There is a vibrant pressure in St. Mark's story that suggests a grand battle. It is generally believed that St. Mark's gospel is the first gospel written and, as such, does not follow other gospel writer's scripts.

Here, St. Mark asks the question: "*What is genuine authority and who has it?*" Is authority found in religion, tradition, or in God? Our gospel writer states that the authority that comes from God in Christ Jesus beats all other authority. The scribes confronted Jesus' authority trying to dishonor him by saying he was demon possessed.

Jesus easily disputes this charge by pointing out that Satan would not damage his own creation. Jesus' point is clear: evil does not throw out evil; good does. St. Mark has Jesus speak a puzzling word: "*Let me illustrate this. You can't enter a strong man's house and rob him without first tying him up. Only then can his house be robbed!*" (V. 27 New Living Translation)

Some researchers believe the meaning of this statement is that Satan has already been taken care of by Jesus. That the evil one is pretty much done while Jesus is nearby. Other scholars think that Jesus is announcing the beginning of a new church. There is another viewpoint that is worth looking at especially because the Protestant church is divided into so many colors and flavors.

Instead of a warning maybe Jesus is proposing a cautionary word here. If 'the strong man,' interpreted as our faith,' is bound-up in endless debate, power plays, bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo, then it is possible that any 'thief' can creep in and steal. All kinds of meaningless and mindless alternatives to serious faith can attract people while organized religion isn't paying attention.

Just take a moment or two in a bookstore or at Amazon.com and note the titles in the

“Religion,” “spirituality,” or “New Age” section. You will discover a huge selection of titles covering topics including “prosperity’ theology, “Christian reincarnation, angelic encounters, demonic encounters, Druidism, etc. 1,001 ideas, the ridiculous to the sublime all within the realm of a culture that claims not to be ‘religious,’ but loves to be called ‘spiritual.’

The ‘strong man’ that Jesus spoke of, organized religion, is often bound to its denominational rules, while opponents loot and steal the spiritually hungry.

Richard Rohr writes, *“Rigid religion and compulsive religiosity, all unloving religion, is rather a clear sign that you have NOT met God! Once you have a unitive experience with God, reality, or even yourself, your life in variably shows two things: quiet confidence and joyous gratitude.”*

It’s possible that we are tied up yet we are not silenced! It may be that we are simply busy in disputes regarding who is right and who is wrong. Who is immoral and who is good. We have stopped looking for accord, agreement, reconciliation or integrity. Too often we have adopted our cultures values of *“It’s a dog-eats-dog world and I want the biggest bite!”*

In selecting our culture’s values we forget the teaching of Jesus: live in love and grace, mercy and forgiveness, patience and tolerance, justice and religion is filled with joy, blessing, and life.

Later on in St. Mark’s gospel Jesus tells us all sin may be forgiven except blaspheming the Holy Spirit. This is possibly one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. People who least understand it usually speak it of. Contempt for God and God’s word in action, word, or thought is the heart of blasphemy, and the judgment of other believers is its chief form.

So much of what is labeled ‘religious’ debate is simply blasphemy because any time someone or some group points a finger at another or devalues the work of the Holy Spirit in another’s faith, it is an unforgivable sin.

Yet, we continue to do it. We put brands on others we differ with such as ‘fundamentalist,’ ‘liberal,’ ‘conservative, shoveling scorn on their heads as proof we are their superiors. It might just be time to unbind the strong man.

Organized religion finds itself in a hard place today. It used to be held in a place of honor. Not so anymore. It is no longer an accolade to be called “religious.” Mostly this is because of the judgementalism, intolerance, condemnation, and prejudice often

found therein.

Denominations and the splits within them tell the world that believers cannot even get their story straight. Backbiting, gossiping, and petty nit-picking within churches strengthens the idea that being Christian leaves you no better off than being a member of any other club.

Is there is answer here? Yes, but it isn't an easy fix. We must first set aside our arguments and our opinions and concentrate on those things we have in common.

If we acknowledge that we have differing opinions and values, but at our centers we are all one family, children of God, sisters and brothers in Jesus, then there is hope.

Change will not happen overnight but if everyone is on the same side there won't be any of "those people" left to dislike. Alleluia. Amen.