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## **Falling Apart or Falling In?**

St. Mark 3:20-35

The musical South Pacific was based on the 1947 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Tales of the South Pacific" by James Michener. The music was written by Rodgers and Hammerstein. In 1949 the musical opened on Broadway winning 10 Tony awards, including all 4 awards for acting. It was made into a movie in 1958. There are many memorable songs in that movie. One song nearly derailed the production. Here are the lyrics: *"You've got to be taught to hate and fear. You've got to be taught from year to year. It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear. You've got to be carefully taught. You've got to be taught to be afraid of people whose eyes are oddly made and people whose skin is a different shade. You've got to be carefully taught. You've got to be taught before it's too late, before you are six or seven or eight, to hate all the people your relatives hate. You've got to be carefully taught!"*

What does this song have to do with our Gospel Lesson, you might ask? Hopefully, it will become more distinct when the sermon is over.

*"When Jesus' family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." The family of Jesus believed he had gone 'bonkers' because of the things he was doing. When I told my friends I had decided to go to seminary, their response was, "The church has got to be really desperate." Many people have the impression of pastors, that you have to be a 'little crazy' to want to do this job, because people do treat you differently: they watch what they say, some squirm in your presence, some keep you at arms length, and other hold you to a higher standard.*

Jesus' family came to "Take charge of him, to detain, retain, hold fast or to lay hold of. The came to get him because they though he was crazy. He was "out of his mind." Literally "He has stood outside." In the deep south they might say, *"He's been out in the sun too long!"*

St. Mark's gospel is believed to be the first of the gospels written, and this means the author was not following a script. Initially, then, St. Mark asks an important question: *"Who has true authority?" Where does authority originate?* The writer says it comes from God and is displayed in Christ Jesus. Unbinding the Strong Man of controversy because he is demon possessed.

By the third chapter, Jesus is at odds with his family, his followers, and the leaders in the political and religious sectors. Jesus is controversial because he confronts tradition, defies authority, and redefines family.

Jesus counteracts the religious leader's lies by pointing out Satan would never destroy his own work. Evil cannot exorcize evil, only good can. Here, Jesus uses a puzzling assertion: *"But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first binding the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered"* (v. 27).

Biblical scholars have been perplexed and are mixed as to the meaning of what Jesus is saying. Some think this means Jesus has already 'taken care' of Satan for the time Jesus is physically present. Other scholars think that Jesus is putting the religious establishment on notice: he will 'tie-up' the Synagogue and usher in a new church. Still a third group of scholars think that this statement is relevant today, with our Mainline Protestant "house-divided" mentality.

Instead of viewing this statement as a 'threat,' Jesus is offering a word of caution: if the 'strong man,' means our faith is 'tied-up' in endless debate, non-productive planning, power-grabs, institutional preservation, then any 'strong man' can sneak in and rob the place.

If you spend any time at Amazon or Half Price Books online, or at one of the rapidly vanishing physical bookstores, and you peruse the "Religion," "Spirituality," or "New Age" sections, what will you discover? Titles of an enormous variety of subjects such as: prosperity gospel, praying your way to success or health, how to contact spirits, encounters with angels or demons, Christian reincarnation, etc.

Thousands of options from the sublime to the ridiculous, all pointing to a culture that states I am “spiritual” not “religious.”

The strong man of organized religion may very well be tied to its own ecclesial throne, while pretenders rob the spiritually hungry and seekers.

We might be tied-up but we are not gagged. A portion of our problem, is that we involve ourselves in endless arguments regards who is wrong and who is right; who is evil and who is good; who is sinful and who is righteous.

Often it is difficult for us to desire unity, reconciliation and justice. When we do not, it become easy to slip into our culture’s passion for competition and winning-at-all-costs. Love, grace, forgiveness, and mercy? Forget about it. When we do, it becomes a simple thing to disregard patience and tolerance, and redefine them as socialism and communism; to put ‘those people’ in their places. To take faith, that life-affirming, joy-producing divine blessing, and turn them into legalistic, authoritarian, proof-texting moralism. Our faith needs no one to break in and tie us up: *we do it ourselves*.

Jesus then tells us that every sin, except ‘blasphemy of the Holy Spirit,’ may be forgiven. This sin is one of the most misunderstood and is tossed about by people who least understand it. Contempt for God and the Holy Scriptures in thought, word, or action is at the heart of this sin. Anytime one church group or one believer points a finger and at another, and ‘devalues’ them, or the work of the Holy Spirit in their ministry, it is an unforgiveable sin.

And yet, we continue to do it. Not just we United Methodists; all religious groups do it. Conservatives, liberals, fundamentalists, progressives, all heap disdain on other’s heads as a means of ‘proving’ our superiority. It is time to untie the strong man. Religion is in a bad way. Once, religion was a positive thing. Not today. Poll after poll has shown that in America most want nothing to do with “religion.”

The difficulty is that people have come to associate “religion” with self-righteousness, judgementalism, condemnation, intolerance, and prejudice. When

you add denominational splits, bickering, and conflict, people begin to think that belief in Jesus offers nothing more than the world.

So, how may we turn this around? While I believe the solution is simple is anything but easy. All of us must set aside our differences and focus on our commonalities. Jesus says *“But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first binding the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.”* Here is our crossroad; acknowledging our differences and values, as “Followers of the Way” we are, at the core, one family, child of God, sister and brothers in Jesus Christ.

Change will not happen quickly, but it can happen. If we are on the same side, there will not be any of “those people” left to dislike. Alleluia. Amen.