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Neither Good, Nor Bad, Simply United in the Spirit

I find today's Gospel reading disruptive, divisive, even discouraging, to say the least. For starters, this passage, at one time in my life, and I would dare to guess, maybe even assume, in many others has been used to thwart the sanctity of our sacred beliefs surrounding Jesus as the one who forgives all sins. As a counselor once told me that while it is true Jesus forgives sins, we mustn't forget the unforgivable sin, that being (as we just read in Mark) blaspheming the Holy Spirit. A sin she was unable to define or explain, which was wholly unhelpful. For another matter, this passage points out my own, and again I would guess and even assume many others', greatest fears surrounding acceptance and position not only within society but within our families as well. For me as a child, it was a fear that I might not fit in or be accepted by others or even my own family as I grew and changed and went off on my own. Now as a mother I fear of my own children one day leaving me, no longer calling out mommy, but something else entirely which I know will feel entirely foreign and earth shattering. Either way this passage feels a lot less like good news and a lot more like a nightmare.

The fear of being cast out, of not fitting in, of not being able to be a part of the "whole", it's real. I mean, I would guess even Jesus felt it, as we hear in our passage, "When his family heard it," "it" being all he had been up to, like gathering together crowds, calling his disciples, casting out demons, eating with sinners, or (even as we heard last week) calling himself the Lord of the sabbath. "They" his family "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.'" I mean wow, that's a lot of accusations and a lot of hostility, not only from the Pharisees and the crowds, but from his own family as well. All because what, he's gathering people together across vast and varied differences, he's opening their minds to new ideas and ways of living and moving and having their being that honor Divine in each and everyone of us, and the God who created it all? That doesn't sound like something people wouldn't want, right?! Especially when the world they live in is already so hard and facing so much turmoil and division? Right?!

We have a saying in our household which is this, "it is neither good nor bad, it just is." And, from time to time we recall this wisdom, at least when we are feeling especially sensible. But, I heard a story this week of a family who has truly had to live into this saying and reality in order to support not only their child but themselves as well. When Heather Lanier's daughter was born the day was supposed to be joyful, full of hope, and light and life. But when the final push came and Fiona entered the world, the doctors and nurses were breathless, as they examined a fresh new full term baby weighing just over 4 lbs, as they assumed and determined something must be wrong. One pediatrician even telling Heather, Fiona's mother, "it must be either bad seed or bad soil." Either way the Lanier's new bundle of joy was not labeled good and the situation certainly appeared, or at least was presented, as entirely bad.

As Jesus responds to the Pharisees who are accusing him of being possessed by the devil, he states, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand... And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come." Once again speaking in parables in order to point to larger truths. Truths like that fact that his work is not of Beelzebub, which interesting fact can be translated literally as Lord of the Dung Heap, but that his work is of God and the Spirit. And, more so that unity (as opposed to a house divided) is a matter of great importance. Not uniformity or sameness mind you, but the beauty of a diverse and varied union between all God's creatures and creation. Jesus may not be conforming to the expectations and regulations of the society around him, which may be why they are accusing him of being possessed by the Lord of the Dung Heap. But, there is no doubt that Jesus is 100% unified and united with God and the Spirit, and more so that he desires to draw others into the gift that is union, with the Divine, with one another, even with ourselves.

As Fiona's parents sought answers and reached out for support they soon learned their beloved daughter had an ultra rare genetic syndrome known as Wolf-Hirschhorn. Causing Fiona to face significant developmental delays, maybe even preventing her from reaching her second birthday. And, as the family journeyed together they soon found their own mantra, neither good nor bad, it just is, as they sought to do away with bell curves, their child would never fit neatly into and expectations that only continued to restrain themselves and Fiona from living their best, most unique, and truly beautiful life. As Heather, Fiona's mother stated, "In that first year I started to realize some things. I could choose to see my daughters' differences as bad. I could believe that the "good" path was the path that erased as many differences as possible. But, she wasn't created like others. Her biological blueprint was unique. And so I dropped the story that a more able bodied life was better. And released the cultural biases about what made a life good or bad and simply watched my daughters life as it unfolded with openness and curiosity." And so as Heather continued opening herself to the possibility that unique was not bad, maybe not even good, but something better, something like whole and holy, allowing to see and know and experience not only Fiona's life, but also her own, as a part of the beautiful and complicated, joyful and hard, expression of the human experience that unites us all together as one.

At the end of our passage for today Jesus states, "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." Not excluding his family, but expanding it, and inviting us to do the same. So that we may live, no longer in a house divide, but one united. Where there is no more division of race, or gender, social or economic status, or even political or moral ideology, but instead simply unity that if we are to survive will have to unify as one. Or else, we may risk that unforgivable sin of blasphemy, not in a way that sends us to eternal punishment, but in a way that separates us from the whole and prevents us from living into God's dream and God's kingdom here and now. Allowing us, as Heather Lianer, Fiona's mother, stated to live into the "beautiful and complicated, joyful and hard, reality of the human experience" together! My friends, the strong man has been bound. We are now free to live life to the fullest, to love without restriction, and to know we are God's, neither wholly good or wholly bad but wholly united as one in grace and hope and love. Amen.