

Message: Walk a Different Path

“The fishing trip is after July 4th”

That’s what my brother Karl told me two weeks ago when we were on our trip to south Texas. Every year my two brothers and some of their friends go on a “guys only” fishing trip to the northwest. They usually catch halibut and salmon, and stock the freezer for the year. It’s also a chance to get away and relax from the grind of the office and the heat of west Texas.

For the last couple of years, my 15 year old nephew Logan has looked forward to going on the trip, hanging out with his Dad, uncle and the older guys. This year, there’s a change in plans, though. Logan asked my brother if he could stay home and go to camp in central Texas with his five buddies. This was an unusual request.

What made Logan’s request so unusual was this: he and his buddies want to go to camp for three weeks. But they aren’t going to camp to hang out, work on their tan, canoe and do things teenagers normally do during their summer vacation.

Instead, they’re going to be camp counselors for three weeks, helping kids their age and younger have fun at camp. When Karl told me about Logan’s plans, he began to choke up with the next part. The camp is a camp for special education children. Logan and his five buddies are going to go spend three weeks helping children who have physical and mental challenges to have fun at camp. There’s no doubt in my mind that everyone involved will learn and grow from the experience – the campers, the six boys and my family.

I’m not telling this story to “toot the horn” of my nephew, brother or family. As a matter of fact, it would be the opposite. No one on our side of the family – none of my brothers or sisters – has ever been a camp counselor. The only thing that could have led my nephew to this decision is his faith and experience at school. Logan goes to a Christian high school and attends church regularly with his five friends. They have decided to make the choice to live their faith, walking a different path than their other friends at school.

Walk a different path than others.

That’s what Jesus calls us to do as his followers. The disciples Jesus called did. Peter and Andrew left the family business to follow Jesus. So did James and John. Matthew walked away from wealth, security, authority and power to follow Jesus. All of the disciples left their families and everything they had to follow Jesus. They walked a different path. They heard Jesus’ call in the way they needed to and they followed. They invited their friends and family to come and meet Jesus, so they could experience a new way of life as well.

We are called to do the same thing today. Most of us don’t leave jobs to follow Jesus, but some do. Most of us don’t walk away from money, status or power to follow Jesus, but some do. Most of us don’t walk away from family to follow Jesus, but some do. We are all called by Christ, but few answer. Some of us invite our friends and family to come and experience God’s love, but not all do.

Why should we? After all, Jesus’ own family reacted negatively to his ministry. Our reading from Mark 3:20-35 shows us. Jesus’ family didn’t respond negatively just once, they responded twice. **Why?** The simplest answer: what Jesus used to say and do in private is now said and done in public. That means other people, including the authorities, are asking questions. The family is embarrassed. They have questions themselves and other people are asking questions they can’t answer. It’s one thing for your brother or sister to say things about God at home. It’s another thing when they are proclaiming it to hundreds and thousands of people on a mountainside. That’s makes sense today as well.

The **first time** the family responded, it was most likely Jesus’ brothers and sisters. The crowds surrounding Jesus were so huge, the disciples and he couldn’t even stop and eat. Their friends were saying, “*Jesus has lost his mind.*” They were publically embarrassed. So they went out to try to take control of the situation, to stop what he was doing. In their view, Jesus was in over his head and the situation was out of control.

Isn’t that true today as well? When you say or do something that expresses your faith in an open, public way, how does your family respond? Are they open, accepting and affirming? Or are they uncomfortable, either responding with silence – hoping you will stop soon – or reacting negatively, trying to quiet you or redirect things?

Our faith walk is often challenged by those who are closest to us. Not when our faith is quiet and passive, but when we walk a different path, when we demonstrate our faith and speak out about it to others.

You know the way the deception goes: faith is a personal, private thing. It’s okay to have a relationship with God, so long as we do so in a quiet place, the privacy of our own home, where we don’t bother or interfere with others’ views of the world. What an isolating way to live! That’s the common path, broad and easy. Jesus calls us to a different path, one that is narrow, difficult and, yes, public. We are part of an extended family, a family that reaches throughout the community. Our path isn’t a private one; it takes us out into our community.

To make matters worse for Jesus’ family, temple authorities come to town from Jerusalem. They’ve heard the stories about the miracles. They’re also watching to see if Jesus is violating their laws. Mark 3:2 is clear on that point, *“They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him.”* The idea that public authorities are watching Jesus makes the family uncomfortable. They fear they are under scrutiny, too.

All across our nation, public authorities are questioning Christian views. In Houston, the mayor asked for a number of prominent pastors to provide copies of sermons and teaching so they could be examined to determine whether they were acceptable. In Massachusetts, one local city government has called for all businesses and government services to be shut off for a theological seminary because of the beliefs of the faculty and staff. Members of the military – officers and enlisted, have been discharged or threatened with dishonorable discharge and lawsuits for affirming their Christian beliefs in public.

What do their families think? If they are like Jesus’ family, they wondering if their loved one has lost their senses. **Why?** What is Jesus saying and doing to create such a fuss? Jesus is teaching everyone a new way to be in relationship with God. Rather than sacrifices, hundreds of rules and meaningless ritual, Jesus is teaching and showing God’s love with a powerful grace. Jesus healed and restored lives, families, community – without force, with love and faith, giving people hope. Jesus came to save us, bringing the kingdom of God and a new

way of living. That’s the message of the Sermon on the Mount, the good news proclaimed by the apostles in Mark 2-3, and the theme of the entire New Testament.

The authorities don’t believe the message. They tell everyone Jesus is possessed by the ruler of the demons. That’s how he has miraculous powers. Their position, power and authority are challenged by this new teaching, so they resort to force through defamation.

Jesus refutes them with two parables and a truth: first, a divided nation cannot stand. Neither can a divided house. We know this is true in our own homes and nation. Jesus can’t be evil, because if one leader challenges another, the result is failure. And even Satan is too smart to do that. So Jesus is not possessed by an evil spirit. Second is the parable of the strong man whose house is robbed while he is at home. There is no way to rob the house unless the strong man is tied up first. Satan is the strong man and he doesn’t want to let go of any of his influence on us. It takes someone stronger than Satan to defeat him and to free us from the sin that controls us. Jesus is the stronger one. He has won the victory over sin and evil. We are free to live a new life, following Jesus of our own free will because he freed us from bondage.

Jesus teaches us a truth about our spirits to complete the picture.

He said, *“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”* (vv28-29). Blasphemy is a theological term. It’s the act of insulting God or God’s character by what we say, think or do.

This passage can be viewed as a statement about “the unforgivable sin,” but N.T. Wright sees it a different way and I agree with his view. These verses aren’t about one sin - all sins separate us from God. Instead, Jesus is teaching us a truth: insulting the Spirit is opposite to praising the Spirit. In James 4:10-11, we learn *“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?”* It’s a rhetorical question. We cannot praise God one minute and insult the Spirit that sustains and cares for us the next. If we find ourselves insulting God more and more often, we are on a path that

does not lead to healing, restoration and heaven. We are on a path that leads to loneliness, isolation and death. That’s the nature of Jesus’ warning to the authorities who were responsible for teaching the people of the nation how they are to live as God’s people.

Jesus has answered the questions of the authorities. They go away, for now. His family is still uncertain. After all, people keep telling them Jesus is saying false things about God and insulting God by healing people on the Sabbath. The crowd doesn’t understand the new way, so they challenge the messenger and his family.

For the second time, Jesus’ family approaches him. This time, they get out the big guns - they call Mom! Mary and Jesus’ brothers went to where he was. They respectfully send someone to ask Jesus to come out and meet them. What does this sound like to you? To me it sounds like intervention time! You know, you are asked to come to a family meeting.... I remember family dinners together when I grew up. They were fun, so long as you hadn’t done something wrong earlier that day. In my family, we had a saying, “those who came to dinner without their wits, came unarmed.”

Are you surprised by what Jesus says to his mother and brothers?

I am. It’s taken me a long time to understand what Jesus is saying. On the face of it, it’s easy. Jesus cares for his new, spiritual friends more than his flesh and blood family. Church family wins over home and family. That just doesn’t seem right. For some, who come from abusive homes, it may be true. But is that really what Jesus is saying? I believe it’s more in the way of a comparison than an absolute. I believe Jesus is telling us three things:

Jesus loves his mother, brothers and sisters. No where does it say otherwise. In fact, one of Jesus’ last acts was to make sure his mother was taken care of after his death. We are to love our family.

Jesus loves his spiritual children just as much. When Jesus looks around at his spiritual brothers and sisters, all he sees are people who he loves just as much as he loves his mother, brothers and sisters. They are no longer “others”, but new brothers and sisters. When we are adopted into God’s family, we have a new identity and a new brother – Jesus,

who will never let us down. We also have a whole bunch of new brothers and sisters who love us, our extended family in the church. Let's love them in return.

Jesus loves God most of all. This is really the key. Jesus loves everyone who does the will of God. Jesus taught us the two greatest commandments: love God and love your neighbor. When we love God, we see the world with new eyes. We are able to listen more deeply and hear with new ears. Best of all, we have a new heart, regenerated by saving faith in Jesus the Christ and our mind is transformed. We are ready to love and be loved.

That's good news! Jesus loves his family. Jesus also loves every person who believes in him, because we are his new family, created for good things. It's news worth sharing with our mother, father, sisters and brothers, friends and strangers we meet on the street. Especially strangers we meet because we don't know if they have ever experienced a loving family, safety and security, and the joys of a family who love and cares for them.

Our church is a home for those who are lonely, afraid, who feel isolated, and all who hurt and need healing. It's a place for people from all walks of life, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, liberal or conservative, extrovert or introvert. We honor and respect your history, country of origin, native language, gender, age or sexual orientation. That's because the church isn't ours: it's the church of Jesus Christ. And we are his sisters and brothers.

Will you walk a different path today?

Mark 3:20-35 (NRSV)

... and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they 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, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.”

And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” - for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “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.”