

## Teachable Moment #3: Discerning Beelzebul

*Mark 3: 20-30*

<sup>20</sup> and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. <sup>21</sup> When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” <sup>22</sup> And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” <sup>23</sup> And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? <sup>24</sup> If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup> And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; <sup>29</sup> but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— <sup>30</sup> for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

There is a new curriculum in schools these days which includes “media literacy” courses. The classes are aimed at helping our children be able to discern between what is true and what is misinformation. It reminds me of something a friend said about parenting: “we’ve known we’ve done our job as parents when our children know two things: 1) that they are loved unconditionally, and 2) that they can discern B.S. when they hear it.”

There’s Jesus healing, casting out demons, when the scribes try to discredit him. They say he is Beelzebul—the ruler of demons—and it is from a demonic source from which he is performing these works. They are publicly discrediting his power and questioning his motivation.

Amazing how we hear the same stuff happening today. It’s as if nothing has changed. Leaders lobbing names at their opponents. Discrediting what is true. Undermining science by discrediting its motivation. Perhaps you’ve heard about the governor of Mississippi. When the CDC said we need to go back to wearing masks he publicly stated that the CDC was being “foolish and harmful” and said their warning has nothing to do with rational science. Then he said, “In Mississippi, we believe in freedom...it is our belief in God that has gotten us through this last year and a half. And it my belief in God that gives me great optimism for what is to come...” Well, there it is: the God card. And what has come since he spoke those words is a major outbreak in Mississippi. Now, let’s ask ourselves who is truly being foolish and harmful here? All it takes is someone in some public position to say “vaccines are government control” or “wearing masks in schools will block the oxygen to our children’s brains” and there’s an avalanche of misinformation leading to argumentation and division and more suffering.

We look at Jesus and he is being called evil. The crowd is in a frenzy to get with him. So local leaders with authority accuse him of practicing witchcraft. They say his power comes from the dark side of the force. And then they take the first page out of the “How to Discredit Your

Opponent” handbook by demonizing him and saying he is out of his mind. Remember years back when other church leaders said the same thing about this church. Trinity called nasty names for loving those from the LGBTQ community. Ministers from some circles said you were out of your mind. And perhaps we can take a bit of comfort because people said the same thing about Dr. King and Civil Rights leaders. They said the same thing about Ghandi. Harvey Milk. Joan of Arc. And they said the same thing about Jesus.

But remember how Jesus responds. He turns this into a teachable moment by working with their Theme. Beelzebul means, “Lord of the House” and so he says, “If a house is divided it cannot stand.” If it’s healing. If it’s freeing. If it’s empowering others, then how can it be demonic? If we attempt to dismantle racism by teaching Critical Race Theory in schools, how can it be racist? If a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Muslim teaching claims that love is the way, how can it be wrong? It’s not our differences which divide us; it’s the way we demonize those differences.

Jesus teaches that he is a thief who has come to tie up the strong man—to bind up Satanic power. Now I get a little ancy when I hear preachers talk about “Satan.” But you need to know, the Hebrew word for “Satan” is Ha-Satan which means “the accuser.” Jesus is teaching that he has come to bind up the accuser. And you see, the irony in the story is that Jesus is called “The Accuser” when *he is one being accused!*

Jesus says, if it’s healing. If it’s freeing. If it’s empowering others, how can it be bad? A house divided cannot stand.

Well, we are watching the division in our nation destroy us all. The misinformation is tearing apart families and our homes. For what? Power? To rile up the base? This week have heard more tragic stories of meaningless death and foolishness. Some are vaccinated and getting sick. BUT we mainly hear about people doubling down on not getting vaccinated while their friends and family members are intubated in the ICU. Medical workers are exhausted. Hospitals busting at the seams. Schools about to start. Teachers are being threatened by anti-maskers. It’s foolishness! This can be prevented but half the country seems determined to commit suicide. In the name of what? Freedom? Individuality? Religious rights? There it is again: the God card. Do we not have a responsibility to each other? We are a house divided and we cannot stand if we are not all standing together.

Yet, Jesus says people who demonize or call others names will be forgiven. But, spreading misinformation about the power of the Spirit is unforgivable. You see, what makes it unforgivable isn’t that God can’t let it go, what makes it unforgivable is that we can’t. Some of us will double down claiming God’s healing power is a limit to our own individual freedoms. And the spreading of misinformation about God’s power will lead people away from healing rather than towards it. And if we can’t recognize the Holy Spirit’s power at work in creation, or science, or in other’s lives, how will we ever recognize the Spirit at work in our own?

It’s another teaching fresh to our ears today. Jesus came to bind up The Accuser and set us free. In these divided times may God help us in knowing two things: 1) that we are loved unconditionally, and 2) that we are able to discern Beelzebul when we hear it.