

You're probably familiar with the basic questioning words tied in with the task of informative writing: who, what, where, when, why and how. These are all things we need and want to know to understand what's happening, for example, in a news story. They are natural questions. We tend to want to know as much as possible about things that are happening to and around us. This is part of a desire for control. Not doing so well with uncertainty, we have an impulse to label causation and consequence. Our brains enjoy being able to neatly label and categorize things for better access and understanding. If any of you are big fans of organizing things, imagine your brain as having one of those cool Dymo label making tools and tagging everything you have in your head like a giant filing system.

This morning, we return to the Gospel of Mark after many weeks spent in John's gospel. We want to remember that for Mark, one of the key themes is looking for and recognizing the kingdom of God in our midst. It is also important to remember that for Jesus, proclaiming the kingdom of God gets him labeled as troublesome and will lead to his death.

In our gospel text, we have two groups of people who have influence or power over Jesus: his own family and the scribes. In their own way, each of these groups labels Jesus. His family says "he has gone out of his mind." The scribes say he is in league with Beelzebul, that perhaps he is even possessed by Beelzebul.

I think we can understand how some of this labeling came to be. Jesus' family was understandably alarmed at what was going on. Jesus has been healing people and attracting great crowds wherever he went. People were clamoring for a chance for an encounter with him. Perhaps Jesus' family wanted to protect him from the masses of people seeking him out, or maybe they were afraid of the things Jesus was declaring about healing and forgiveness of sins. These were, after all, bold claims that could get him into a whole lot of trouble. It could be declaring that Jesus has gone out of his mind is a way of "circling the wagons" in an attempt to protect him.

As for the scribes, they have been keeping tabs on Jesus and what he has been up to. They are well aware of the things Jesus has said and done. They needed the ability to explain how some of these things could be possible (someone pass the label maker!) Sensing that this Jesus was a major threat to the status quo and a challenge to authority, this troublemaker had to be handled. The easy thing to do? Claim that Jesus must obviously be working with Beelzebul, the arch-demon. The scribes wanted people to see that Jesus was clearly aligned with evil. In labeling Jesus this way, they could try to convince people that Jesus was bad news and not to be trusted. More than that, by declaring Jesus' alliance with Beelzebul, the scribes are setting the stage for the future. It would be important to control and contain Jesus by any means necessary. This was almost a way of writing their own carte blanche to do whatever it might take. Biblical scholar N.T. Wright says of this episode "Again, Mark allows the dark shadow of the cross to fall on the page even at this early stage in the story."

Of course, Jesus has something to say about the accusations leveled at him by the scribes. Instead of snapping back at them with a label or two of his own, he clearly demonstrates how they haven't thought their own label through – that it doesn't make any sense. If Satan were to cast out Satan, he (or it) would be fighting against himself. It just doesn't work. That's where we get the lines about kingdoms and houses divided against themselves not being able to stand.

Jesus goes on to explain what he is actually up to. Instead of being in cahoots with Satan, a force of evil, Jesus has come instead to dislodge and displace the powers of this world. Here is one place where Jesus does talk about labeling. When he speaks of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, he is speaking of being able to discern what is going on – do not attribute something that is the work of God to the devil. This is part of recognizing who Jesus is and what Jesus is about. As we see throughout the Gospel of Mark, the kingdom of God is near and present in Jesus.

As this morning's text from Mark continues, we have a few brief verses that deal with family and identity. We might hear Jesus' words about who are his mother and brothers and just receive them in a rather neutral way. But that's us hearing or reading through the filter of both our modern society and our

faith traditions. We have an almost built-in concept of the extended family of faith through our understanding of holy baptism. Also, these days, actual families are spread far and wide, geographically speaking, which necessitates the development of what is called “families of choice,” those people and friends we surround ourselves with and come to think of as family.

The words Jesus speaks about family, however, would have been completely shocking in that day. The true family, the immediate kinfolk, would be the absolute example of tightness and fidelity. One’s connection with one’s family and loyalty to that family was a vital part of Jewish identity. For Jesus to claim that those who sat around him were his family was absolutely scandalous. This declaration of brother, sister, mother redefined the sense of who family is. Traditional labels were thrown out the window.

In a sense, Jesus’ life and ministry were about shaking up all sorts of labels. The strong would become weak, the lame would be made whole, those in power would be dethroned, and the ideas about who was on the inside and who was on the outside would be turned upside down. Jesus brought an alternate reign into the world.

Perhaps this text from Mark gives us pause to consider how quickly we assign value and meaning to things and people. Up, down, in, out, right, wrong, like me or different from me. These are all ways in which we categorize. What wonderful joy we can have in remembering that in Jesus, all the labels and categories into which we place people and into which we have been placed end up being pushed aside. We walk away with the one label that matters most: beloved Child of God. May we live into that identity with all our might each and every day.

Amen.

