

A lot of people have been travelling recently. AAA Travel projected that last weekend more than 37 million people traveled 50 miles or more from home, to visit friends and loved ones, and just escape the doldrums of our quarantine surroundings. Some of you may have travelled back home - this is what Jesus was doing in our gospel lesson today. He'd just done a bunch of healing and teaching, appointed the 12 disciples and then he headed back home. Now Nazareth, where Jesus was from, was a small town and when he showed up - adoring throng in tow - the people of Nazareth began to talk. Did you hear about Mary and Joseph's boy - he's healing the sick, and casting out evil spirits, he's feeding the hungry on the sabbath, and he's even eating with tax collectors. That boy's plum lost his mind.

His family tries to restrain him. To talk some sense into him. They're worried about all that he's been saying and doing. The religious elders, the scribes, are worried about what Jesus is saying and doing too, but not so much because they are concerned for his wellbeing. They're concerned about their own wellbeing and the ways Jesus is challenging their authority and all they have come to know to be righteous.

Jesus is so totally not what people expect. They have absolutely no idea what to make of him. He doesn't fit their categories, and what doesn't fit our categories we typically label abnormal, or deviant, or crazy, or possessed. We assume that what we know, have experienced, and hold to be true is normal, natural, and God-ordained, and that becomes the standard by which we measure -- and judge -- the thoughts and actions of others.

But Jesus' whole ministry is about announcing both a new understanding of who God is and how we are to be in relationship with God. And at the heart of that gospel vision is the conviction that God is love, and desires the health and healing of all creation, that God stands both with us and for us, that God is determined to love and redeem us no matter what, and that this God chooses to be accessible to all of us, to anyone and everyone.

This is why Jesus sets himself against all the powers that would rob humanity and creation of the abundant life God intends -- whether those powers be unclean spirits; diseases that ravage the mind, body or spirit; illness that isolates and separates those who suffer from community; or systems of oppression. Jesus' gospel message of who God is and how we are to relate to God is not what any of those -- okay, make that any of us -- religious folk would expect.

At its heart religion is about ordering our relationship with God. The root of the word itself comes from the Latin *ligare*, to bind, like in the words "ligament" (tissue that binds together) and "obligation" (the duties to which one is bound). Religion, then, can be understood as that which connects us to God (the actions we undertake out of reverence to God, the promises of covenant God makes with us).

And yet, the problem arises if we allow our religion to become a substitute for a genuine, living relationship with God, if we become all tied up with the need to manage and control that relationship or, worse, to manage and control God.

This is the predicament in which the Scribes find themselves in today's story. It's not that their way of relating to God is wrong -- they are part of a long and proud religious tradition of service to God and God's people. It is just that Jesus doesn't conform to their structures. Jesus declares that the law isn't about regulating our relationship with God, but was given by God to help us get more out of life. And so he heals whenever and wherever there is need, even on the Sabbath. And he welcomes all, even those normally excluded by certain religious restrictions or customs. In all these ways Jesus points back to the wildly merciful and unpredictably (and uncontrollably) gracious God who is always doing a new thing.

But the scribes can't see this – and so they say that Jesus is possessed by the ruler of the demons. In turn Jesus speaks to them in a series of interesting parables. One of the stories he tells states that no one would try to enter a strong man's house and steal his property without first binding the strong man. This line has inspired a truly incredible book "Binding the Strong Man" by Ched Myers which outlines the many ways in which the Gospel of Mark depicts Jesus as doing just that – undertaking a miraculous and surprising ministry that binds the strong man – the Roman Empire, the oppressors, the scribes who would deny healing to the least of these – in order to feed the hungry, set the prisoner free, give voice to the widow, empower the disciples - and in turn, to empower each of us. Jesus' work is to destroy evil at its root through the power of the Holy Spirit and the sharing of God's gospel of grace and love for all people.

So when the scribes say that Jesus is the evil one he tells them that they have committed the Unforgivable Sin. We know that Jesus preaches a message about forgiveness for all people, but there is one sin that cannot be forgiven... to call the working of the Holy Spirit the work of

Satan. The scribes are blind to the work that God is doing. They are closed off to the power of the Holy Spirit. They have decided that God cannot be doing such things, so if they deny the power of the Holy Spirit to forgive, cleanse, heal, then they cannot be forgiven. And why are they so afraid that the Holy Spirit is actually working through Jesus – because then the Holy Spirit would be breaking into the lives of all different kinds of people. Perhaps the Holy Spirit cannot be restrained by those old tethers.

Are there ways in which we keep ourselves closed off – from people, experiences, ideas that might make us uncomfortable? Have you ever had an experience where you thought someone was really different from you, had different values than you, probably didn't like you very much and so you just stayed away. But then maybe there was a Holy Spirit moment where you got to know that person in a different way and found a new perspective, or at least shook your head and said "what was I so scared of"?

The Unforgiveable sin is to let fear close down the work of the Holy Spirit. To let our fear of difference, of getting hurt, of being impacted, keep us from working to bring healing, inspiration and hope to others. Religion is supposed to bind people to God, not keep us separated from one another. And so Jesus binds the right thing – the forces of Evil, of selfishness, of fear – while freeing people to experience and share the blessings of the Holy Spirit.

As he breaks the bread, and his body is broken, those bindings that kept us from sharing love widely, from sharing our gifts, from asking for our hunger to be fed and our places of hurt to be healed – they also are broken. As we move into communion and break the bread – let us remember all that binds us to each other and to God, but also break the bonds that would keep us from expanding our embrace and our understanding of the radical nature of the Holy Spirit which cannot be tethered.