**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC June 7, 2015**

***Pass the Apple***

**A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**THE STORY OF ORIGINAL SIN** Genesis 3:8-13

This morning we have an Old Testament reading for our Words of Confession. It’s the story of Adam and Eve from the Book of Genesis. Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden is sometimes called Original Sin, meaning the first sin.

Adam and Eve are our original ancestors in faith, and they prove to be not faithful in one way: obedience. In that way Eve and Adam are like us, and we are like them. We may even say, “Pass the apple,” willfully disobeying what we understand to be the will of God.

From 1670 to 1770, children in the American colonies learned their ABC’s from The New England Primer, the first textbook printed on our shores. At the time there was no difference between church and state, and so the children learned the letter “A” with this little verse: “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.”

Like those original sinners, Adam and Eve, we all have things that we regret doing ---- or not doing. The promise of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit is that if we are repentant, we are forgiven. So let us take some time now to think about what we regret in our lives, and offer it to God in repentance. It could be something small or something big --- if a regret comes to mind, give it to God. Give it to God in silent prayer. Our time for Silent Prayer will be followed by an Organ Interlude and the Unison Words of Affirmation. Let us pray to the Lord in the silence of our hearts.

**UNISON WORDS OF AFFIRMATION** Revelation 22:1-3

The story of Adam and Eve is in the very first book of the Bible, and our Words of Affirmation for this morning come from the very last book of the Bible, The Book of Revelation.

In our Words of Affirmation God’s angel shows us the river of life, and on either side of the river is the tree of life. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden so that they would not have access to the tree of life. Now, through the forgiveness of God, all are invited to partake of it.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Mark 3:20-35

In this reading we see Jesus having a bad day. You might even say that Jesus is having a meltdown. Jesus had been busy casting demons out of people. At that time, people with demons were thought to be possessed by Satan, whereas today we might call them troubled and in need of therapy and/or medication.

Charismatic and powerful Jesus does a great job casting out demons, but many of the people who witness Jesus’ deeds doubt his divine authority. These people are saying that Jesus himself is possessed by Beelzebul, whom we would call Satan. So in this view, it is Satan that is casting out Satan.

Jesus is outraged by this accusation, and he makes an analogy that Abraham Lincoln quoted during the American Civil War: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Jesus is further outraged because he feel that those who are critical of him are blaspheming the Holy Spirit, who is at work in the healings of Jesus. Jesus is so upset that he seemingly rejects his family, his mother, brothers and sisters, who come to comfort him. Yet in so doing, Jesus expands the concept of family from relationships of ancestry and marriage to relationships of spirit.

Anyway, that is enough of an introduction. Let’s read what the Gospel of Mark 3:20-25 has to say for itself.

**SERMON**

This is an important story about Jesus for it shows that Jesus is fully human, as well as fully divine. Later in his ministry, Jesus will have learned how to live with criticism and not take it personally, but at this point in time, Jesus is totally offended.

Did you notice that the incidents described take place in Chapter 3 of the Gospel of Mark? Jesus has just called his twelve disciples, and he is starting to do the work that God has called him to do.

Jesus has been called to announce to all people the coming of the Kingdom of God, to baptize for the forgiveness of sins, to preach that we are to forgive and love each other as God forgives and loves us, to teach by example, in parables and sayings, and to die and be raised from the dead as a sign of God’s reconciling love for all.

But the crowds that come to hear Jesus are tremendous, so big and so demanding that Jesus and his disciples cannot even find a time and place to eat.

Jesus has this huge agenda from God on his mind. He is just getting started when some people accuse Jesus of being in league with Satan and perhaps being Satan himself. Some say that Jesus has gone out of his mind. His family is worried.

Jesus is totally offended, partly because what his critics are saying is so illogical. How can Satan cast out Satan? How can the president of a country overthrow himself?

Jesus uses the analogy of needing to tie up a strong man to plunder his property to speak about himself. Jesus is saying, “If you are going to try to steal God’s message of love from me, you are going to have to tie me up. I am not going to go quietly.”

Jesus is incensed that his critics are also blaspheming the Holy Spirit by calling Jesus Satan. Jesus understands that his healings are done in partnership with the Holy Spirit and Jesus is as protective of the Holy Spirit as an older brother would be. Jesus gives those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit an eternal curse, which is so unlike him: “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.”

Later on in his ministry, Jesus teaches that we are to forgive seventy times seven. In the story of the woman taken in adultery, he says, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” And one of his seven last words from the cross is, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

But right here and now, in Chapter 3 of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has had it. Eventually Jesus goes inside a house, where a crowd of people has gathered around him, listening and appreciating what he has to say about God’s love. This crowd is not accusing Jesus of anything; they are receiving him and the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus’ family, his mother, sisters and brothers come to the house and ask for him. Most likely they are being protective and want to take Jesus home with them and give him something to eat.

But by this time, Jesus is on a roll. He is with a crowd of believers, and so he asks, “Who are my mother and my sisters and brothers? And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”

While these words may have hurt the feelings of his biological family, Jesus was expanding the concept of family into what eventually becomes the Church, those who follow him and try to understand and do the will of God.

And Jesus' biological family is part of his newly extended family. Jesus is not denying his family tree, but expanding it. From the cross, Jesus asks his disciple John to take care of his mother, saying, “Woman, behold your son (John); Son, behold your mother (Mary).”

And what is the importance of this story for us? Here we see the passion of our Lord directed at those who would blaspheme God and the Holy Spirit. Jesus says things he never repeats about there being no forgiveness for those who say that he has an unclean spirit, that he is related to Satan.

But then at the end of today’s story, we see our Lord’s loving embrace, as family, of all who follow him and do the will of God, regardless of what they had thought and done previously, regardless of their ancestry.

I believe that it is helpful for us to see the passion as well as the love of Jesus, encouraging us to speak strongly when strong words need to be said, and also to build an inclusive community of those who believe and want to act, welcoming everyone.

Adam said to Eve, “Pass the apple. God was angry at their disobedience, but God’s anger was not the end of the story. Adam, Eve, and the human race found a new life beyond the walled-in garden, and heard the promise of eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth to come, as described in the Book of Revelation.

Like Jesus, may we also speak words of truth, words of forgiveness, words of inclusion. Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE**

 *O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee*

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