

June 10, 2012
NE Iowa Synod Assembly
Mark 3: 20-35

Invitation, Rejection and Forgiveness

She was weird. And she wasn't smart. Geez, she wasn't smart. She included a biography of General Ulysses S. Grant in her report on World War II. She didn't wash much – her clothes neither – and she ate her own buggers. She was the kooky-bug.

For eight years she went to school at St. Dachau at Sixteenth and Paulina and we shoved her into the ovens of our cruelty and she didn't even put up a fight.

For eight years we didn't touch her. And when we did it was only by accident or if the teacher was looking and then you had to pass the koodies on but if you couldn't then you made a gun out of your forefinger and thumb and you sssss'd with your mouth and sprayed the part of your body that touched her body. I don't know how she put up with it. She should have transferred schools. I don't know why she didn't.

In the eighth grade when everyone got autograph books, even I got one. Not the kind everyone else got from the company that sells them to kids in school who are going to graduate that have the school's name printed on

them but one from the store. It cost four fifty less than the ones from the company. My brother bought it for me and I'll always love him for that.

Anyway, nobody asked for her autograph and nobody wanted her autograph and nobody would sign her book and she had one from the company and she bought it with her own money. And I saw her standing there looking around for an autograph and after Harriet Horkle, the substitute kooky-bug, there was nobody else in line to sign her book. And there she was walking around real weird like she always did with her sweater over her shoulders and her shoulders going back and forth like a washing machine and she didn't ask anybody but she was just standing there looking around. And her face didn't say get me out of this oven. She was practically smiling. And she never cried. Not in eight years. She never once cried and she scratched her dandruff and looked around and she didn't scream or cry or bleed all over us.

So when no one else was in Suzanne's line I went up and she stopped scratching and handed me her book and I signed it. It wasn't even hard. It wasn't hard at all. I never sprayed the koodies off anyway. So, I didn't mind signing it. It was no big deal. And then I gave her my book to sign and she did, "Congrajulashuns!" (she misspelled it!) and that was it. It didn't change her life or anything. She didn't go off and become prom queen in high

school. It probably didn't do a thing for her at all. But me, well, when I think of that day, I remember stepping up to a bar and Suzanne pouring me a tall glass of salvation. And it went down so easy.

I wish I could take credit for that powerful story of rejection and invitation but I can't. I don't know who wrote it or even remember where I first read it. What I do know is that this is a story that we can all relate to. I would venture to say that just about everyone here has at least one story of rejection from our growing up years....times when we were the butt of a joke, not invited to a party or realized that supposed friends were whispering about us behind our backs. The reality is that there is a time in life when kids can be cruel. Heck, there are times in life when adults can be cruel.

It's kind of surprising really because we all start out so much the same. But somewhere along the line we begin to focus more on our difference than our similarities. A few years ago I saw the documentary movie, *Babies*. Perhaps you might recall it. If you didn't see it, *Babies*, chronicles the development of four babies from first breath to first steps. From Mongolia to Namibia to San Francisco to Tokyo, each cry, each smile, each step and each milestone of development is recorded. What you see over time is how similar we all are...how the stages of development occur so much the same no matter who we are, no matter where we are – smiling, vocalization, finger coordination,

crawling, playing and walking.. And then you see how culture plays a role....actually a very small role at that young age – and where personality fits in. So we start out all very much the same. Somewhere along the line we begin to focus on our differences...male and female, hair color, ethnicity, sexual orientation, what we have, what we don't have. We learn to tease and exclude, decide who is in and who is out. We like to think that somewhere further down the line, we mature, we grow out of it. But do we?

In our gospel reading for today we are faced with the question of who is in and who is out. In the earlier chapters of Mark we hear of Jesus calling the twelve disciples. They are in. And for a brief time so are the many others who follow Jesus, experience his preaching, teaching and healing. But, now, even at this early point in Mark's gospel, the tide is turning, some are starting to question, some are starting to reject, some are saying Jesus is crazy and some are saying he is the devil himself. The lines are being drawn and not in obvious ways, definitely not in good ways. Family, not what you'd think. Friends, not always reliable. But Jesus cuts through all of it and ultimately has just one standard to define who is in and who is out....whoever does God's will.

So then, what is God's will? When my husband and I were preparing to get married, we invited our Bishop to perform the ceremony so we had to meet

with him a few times to do a little pre-marital work and plan the wedding. During one of those meetings my husband asked the Bishop the same question before us now, What is God's will? What is God's will for us? What is God's will for the world? The Bishop took a deep breath, paused a moment and then said one word, Shalom. Shalom. Peace, wholeness, love, forgiveness all wrapped into that one Hebrew word. God's will for us is that we experience all of those things as children of God and God's will for us is that we are ambassadors of all of those things as children of God. We experience shalom: peace, wholeness, love, forgiveness and then we share shalom: peace, wholeness, love, forgiveness.

In the midst of this challenging passage from Mark, there is good news for us! The good news for us today is that no matter how many lines we draw, no matter how we judge others, assign them status as in or out, Jesus forgives us all our sins, Jesus bring shalom. As adults our dividing lines may be more subtle than the teasing and taunting that comes from children but often its not – look at how busy we are lifting up difference and creating walls around the world, in Israel, at the Mexican border, or among congregations right here in our own church. All around us, we see lines being drawn, immigration issues, sexuality issues, political issues, economic issues and the list goes on and on. Some days it feels at though we take two

steps forward and the world pushes us back three. We could allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by that but why? We are not people who have no hope, we have the shalom of Christ, we have Jesus' example of peace, wholeness, love and forgiveness. Walls were meant to be broken down, lines are meant to be crossed, differences can be overcome, wounds can be healed. Shalom.

Bishop DeFreese shared a story at a meeting that I was in recently and it is a story that has stuck in my mind. At one of the congregations in the Nebraska synod, there was a man from Vietnam who had begun to attend worship. He didn't speak any English at all. He couldn't join in the prayers or sing the hymns. But for 3, then 4, then more and more weeks he kept on showing up; sitting in the same place, at the same time, each week (some habits really are cross cultural!). At the other end of that same pew, each week, was a family with a couple of teenage girls – a miracle in and of itself. One Sunday one of the girls appeared to be texting on her phone during worship. Her mother was outraged and repeatedly told her daughter to knock it off. But the girl was impervious to the demands of her mother and kept on doing what she was doing. And when it was time for the sharing of the peace, the girl walked down to the pew to the Vietnamese man and showed him her phone....where she had looked up how to say Peace Be With You in Vietnamese. When I heard that I thought....maybe that day it was two steps

forward and only one step back. Each and every day we have opportunity for those small steps, those little gestures and those not so little gestures that bring down walls, that cross lines, that bring end to division and invite us deeper into God's will, deeper into the shalom that God seeks for each and every one of us. Each of those steps is an opportunity for us to step up to the bar where Jesus will pour us a tall of glass of salvation....and, honestly, it goes down so easy.