

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

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Third Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 3:20-35

Our Crazy Family

The Bible is full of crazy people. Today we get Jesus, but there are plenty of others.

Imagine what went through the minds of those who lived next to Noah as he built the ark?
What did the neighbors think of Abraham when he and Sarah left their home in their old age
and set out for a new land?
Or how about David as he approached Goliath with nothing but five smooth stones and a
little slingshot?
What about the twelve disciples who left their jobs to follow him?
What did the people think about the rich, high status women who paid most of the expenses
of Christ's raggedy group?
When Paul was preaching before the King, Queen, and a Roman official, the official says to
him "You're out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!" (Acts
26:24)

The Bible and the Christian faith are full of people who on the surface would seem...crazy, out of their
minds, or as our reading today literally says about Jesus, beside himself.

And what is important to note is that Jesus is thought to be crazy not because he is following God, but
because he has just called the twelve disciples to follow **him**. Jesus is considered out of his mind
because he has gone beyond normal for a religious prophet and teacher. A typical rabbi **would** call
disciples to follow God through his own teaching; but Jesus is not typical.

So what's so special about Jesus that he's calling people to follow HIM?

After all, they don't know LOTS about him...we're at the beginning of the story here...and they certainly
don't know that Jesus IS God, that he is the long-awaited Messiah.

He has done and said just enough to raise the concern of the religious officials....
Because what he's been doing and saying **does** sound crazy.

He claims to be "the Beloved,"
the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit,
the one who announces the kingdom of God,
the one who casts out demons,
the healer of all diseases
the one who comes for the unrighteous,
"the Lord even of the Sabbath,"
the one who forgives sins (which only God is supposed to do!)

These are some pretty outlandish claims.

C. S. Lewis (author of *Narnia* series) wrote about this in a chapter in his book *Mere Christianity*. He
suggests that when considering Jesus' claims to be God, that there are only three possibilities.

He could be lying - saying he's God when in fact he knows he's not.
He could be crazy - thinking he's God when in fact he's not.
Or he is in fact who he says he is.

Lewis gave the chapter the title, "Liar, Lunatic or Lord."

There have always been people who have lied about their credentials to get prestige, or money, or power. And religious leaders are not exempt - they are tempted like everyone else. But someone who lies about who they are is not to be trusted.

Could Jesus have been a LIAR?

It's telling that even those who do not see Jesus as God, or even Son of God, do not see him as a liar. They often credit him as being a great moral teacher. If he's not who he says he is, and is lying about it, why would we lift him up as a great moral teacher? The answer to WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) can't be - he'd lie!

So then maybe he's a LUNATIC. After all, those who were closest to him, his family, didn't call him a liar. They knew from experience that he was morally beyond reproach. Calling him crazy was much easier. He must be out of his mind.

Maybe all that time (40 days) without food in the wilderness did something to him. After all, when he became 30, he left the family carpentry business and went out to become a rabbi without formal training.

But then we hear what he has to say, and these are not the words of a lunatic. They are often very practical, quite insightful. When his enemies try to trick him by forcing him to choose either between God and Caesar, stoning the adulterous woman or forgiving her, Jesus always has an amazingly insightful response.

There really is no evidence that he was crazy - or mentally ill in today's language.

So we're left with the third option - that he is who he says he is.

If I, or any of us, claimed to be *the way, the truth and the life* we'd have reason to wonder. But Jesus claims this and more.

C.S. Lewis concludes his discussion of liar, lunatic or lord with these words:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the Son of God; or else he is a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

(Mere Christianity p. 56)

For Jesus to claim that he is Lord - that he is, not just the Son of God, but that he is actually God in the flesh - was a terribly radical claim - one that got him killed, as well as many who followed him. And much of the time it seems that while we are not physically persecuted for following Jesus, we can be perceived as a bit crazy, out of our minds, beside ourselves for believing in Jesus.

I wonder, have you ever been given odd looks when you shared your faith?

It is a real and frequent fear for people, now and here, to fear being thought of as crazy, ridiculous, out of touch, because of being associated with Jesus.

I experienced this when I was in college within my own family. My parents had raised us in the church but were clear about NOT believing and stopped going to church after I was confirmed. I loved church and had a great youth group and good friends there, so I continued to go, getting rides until I could drive.

The first Christmas I was home from college, my best friend Wendy (from church) and I were seated at my parents formal dining room for formal Christmas Eve dinner and were talking about how we needed to go back to church for the 11pm service. (We had already been to the 5:00pm service which was a pageant the youth group did every year.)

Suddenly, and I have no idea what prompted it, my mom turned to me and asked, “You don’t actually believe that virgin birth stuff do you?” And I knew in a split second that this was a defining moment for me as a Christian and as a member of my family. “Well,” I began, “Wendy and I believe that virgin birth stuff.” (I was more than grateful that Wendy was with me!)

My brother stormed away from the table in anger; my grandmother began shaking her head with her face in her hands; my mom and dad began a barrage of “We’re spending how much money to send you to a good college and you come home spouting THAT?” “We raised you to be an intellectual person, not to believe....” And so it went....

In the years after that, we did not speak much of matters of faith, though at the end of my dad’s life he discovered the comfort and love of God which made his death a “good death”; and my mother has since renewed her relationship with my home church, worshipping faithfully (though still not believing!) But there she is every week, hearing the Word of God whether she knows it or not!

For some of us, our Christian family is not the same as our family of origin. The saying goes, “blood is thicker than water.” But in the church we can say that water is thicker than blood – meaning that the waters of baptism make Christians into a family that binds us together in ways our nuclear family doesn’t. In fact, we see Jesus rearranging his own family – not just here in this passage, but also when he was hanging on the cross, HE gave his mother “away” to his most beloved friend.

You are family to each other. Someone here was having surgery; they live alone, and the doctor asked who was going to take care of her in her recovery. Well, she said, I have this great church!

It’s counter cultural, even crazy perhaps, to profess that Jesus is Lord, not just on the pages of an ancient text, but of our lives as well!

Being a Christian in 2018 in New England is not easy! And it shouldn’t be. In fact, we’re probably a little closer to the first century Christians now than the Christians of the 1940’s and 50’s and 60’s and 70’s who went to church simply because everybody did and it was accepted and expected, like being a cursory member of a club.

Maybe we are a little crazy to be in the family of faith these days.
But that’s okay – because we follow the one who
 heals when there’s no cure
 comforts when all hope is lost
 strengthens when we’re at our weakest
 forgives what we can’t forget

I’d rather be crazy and in a relationship with God and with you all, than sane and on my own without any of that.

Amen.