

“The Word on the Street”  
Mark 3:19b-27  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

June 6, 2021  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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The Presbyterian pastor Scott Black Johnston tells of a graveside service that he conducted years ago.

He was there with the family at the cemetery, and they were waiting on a few other family members to show up, and then they would begin the service.

During that time of waiting, a woman in a tie-died dress approached Scott. She said that she had been hired by the son-in-law of the deceased to do a DOVE RELEASE at the burial.

A dove release?

This wasn't exactly in the Presbyterian *Book of Order*.

So Scott said, “Ok, but it's got to be after the service itself is over, after the benediction. When I'm done, you can do the dove release.”

A few minutes later, the last family members arrived.

They had the service, they said goodbye to Al, they prayed over the casket and threw dirt on the casket and read Scripture about the promise of God's power over death.

Scott offered the benediction...and then woman in the rainbow dress stepped forward.

She had a wicker-basket with her that had two sides. She opened one side of the wicker basket, and five brownish birds appeared—birds that looked suspiciously liked HOMING PIGEONS—and she freed

them from the basket, and they took flight, making their way west toward the towering pine trees above.

Then, opening the other side,  
the rainbow dress woman released a white dove.

“This bird is carrying Al’s soul to heaven,” she announced to everyone.

This bird also flapped its way west,  
but just as the dove got to the big stand of pines,  
ANOTHER BIRD—  
what looked like a HAWK of some sort—  
came zooming out of the pines, and BAM:

in the blink of an eye,  
everyone saw a puff of feathers,  
with a few feathers gently floating  
back down to the ground.

Al’s widow GASPED in horror.  
Tie-died woman made a squeaking noise.

And Scott Black Johnston silently said to himself that it’s a big mistake to ever plan a loved one’s burial around homing pigeons.<sup>1</sup>

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Of course, I’m with Dr. Black Johnston on this one.  
It’s not just poor planning.  
It’s poor theology.

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<sup>1</sup> This story was told by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston in his sermon, “Raise,” at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, October 31, 2010.

Souls that travel on the back of a bird—that’s a bit too OUT THERE, a bit “over the top” for my theological tradition and imagination.

But that tension that Scott experienced at the burial,  
 the tension between what some view as perfectly normal,  
 and what others view as way, way OUT THERE—  
 that tension is not new.

It’s as old as our text for today.  
 Our text for today is a strange passage, but it doesn’t start out that way.

It begins with a large gathering of people, all of them there to see Jesus, hear Jesus, be healed by Jesus. Mark writes: “...the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.”

Crowds flocking to see Jesus.  
 All of which sounds perfectly normal.

But then in verse 21, we read something else:

**“When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’”**

Did you catch that?  
 The word on the street was not just that Jesus was popular.  
 Some people thought that Jesus was crazy.  
 That he might not be in his right mind anymore.

That’s not how we usually think about Jesus.  
 What are we to make of this?  
 Before we get to that...let me pause and insert a footnote here.

I hope that none of you hear any of this as making light of mental illness. It is one of the great SHAMES of our society that mental and emotional illness is often perceived with a stigma, as something to hide or be embarrassed about.

That's not it at all.

Not close to what the gospel teaches.

Heck, if there's anything that the past 15 months ought to help us see more clearly, it's how important mental health is for everyone, and how fragile anybody's emotional state can become.

So please do not misunderstand.

None of this is making light of mental or emotional illness, or the pain that come from dealing with such difficulties.

What I am saying is that when Jesus healed  
and preached and taught,  
and when Jesus cast out demons,  
there were multiple mindsets about him:

***Some people loved him, his family wanted to restrain him,  
and others thought he was out of his mind!***

Why would people have such conflicting opinions about Jesus?

If we read Mark's Gospel carefully, we get hints of the answer along the way...

Look at Mark 2.16:

“When the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

In other words, stick with the right people for your parties, Jesus.  
You're crossing a line here, Jesus.

You're being EXCESSIVE, Jesus.

I think that word, excessive, has something to do with it.  
I'd like you to think about that word, play with that word this morning.

Jesus was always surprising people, shocking people, going beyond what anyone expected he would say or do.

Perhaps you remember the time later in Mark's Gospel, when the rich man comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him, "You lack one thing:

go, sell what you own,  
and give the money to the poor...  
then come, follow me."

Sell ALL that he owns?

Why not 10%? Why not one-half?

All??

Isn't that taking things just a bit too far, Jesus?

Or how about when Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple?

Why didn't he just go in and say: I disagree with you!

Why did he throw them out like he owned the place?

Isn't that...a little excessive??

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Look, whenever something excessive happens in my life, it's often because I overreacted, and I usually regret that it happened.

A number of years ago, back when we lived in Dallas, I took our dog to get her groomed. When I called to make the grooming appointment, the groomer informed me that she needed a vaccination update. I said we'd take her to our vet that week, and I'd bring the paperwork in with our dog.

Now the groomer worked at a DIFFERENT veterinarian's office—so I delivered the papers and when I went to pick up our dog later that day, the guy at the front desk told me I was all set.

“That'll be \$150.”

“For a grooming?”

“No...for a grooming and all the vaccinations.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I had her vaccinated at OUR vet last week, and dropped the paperwork off with you this morning.”

Well...

Turns out, someone in the front failed to relay the paperwork to the back.

So before they groomed her, they looked at her chart, the vet saw the original note that read “Needs vaccination”—and they vaccinated our dog AGAIN!

And instead of asking what that meant for our dog, I just got mad!  
What do you mean you double-dosed our dog??

I started talking loudly enough so that EVERYONE in the room would know what had happened.

The guy at the desk said, “Maybe you'd like to go to an examination room to talk with the vet.”

I said, “I’ll speak with the vet right here.”

He said, “I just thought you’d be more comfortable in another room.”

I said, “It sounds like YOU would be more comfortable if I was in another room.”

Long story short, the vet came out and apologized, and assured me that there was no medical danger to our dog. And she told me there would be no charge for the visit. And she said she would call our vet to let him know.

And I got home, and I settled down.

After I had settled down, I felt a little guilty for throwing the fit. After all, our dog was fine, and they gave us a free grooming, and I made a small scene over something that ended up being no big deal...

My behavior felt—excessive.

Are you comfortable with that kind of behavior?

Excessive behavior?

When someone just really goes over the top?

If it’s for a graduation party, it’s one thing.

But when it comes to matters of faith...

Presbyterians are not exactly known for being OUT THERE with our words and our ways. But here’s the thing: whenever he talked about the nature and character of God, Jesus used the language of excess.

It wasn’t language of excessive violence.

And it wasn’t language of excessive anger.

It was the language of excessive love.

He talked about God's love—not in moderate, Presbyterian, decent and in order ways. He spoke of God's love in radical, over the top ways:

A father who runs out to welcome the prodigal back home and then proceeds to throw his son a party, but leaves the party to go plead with his older, self-righteous son to join the party.

A landowner who pays the late in the day workers the same as the early morning workers.

He instructed his disciples to forgive 70 x 7.  
To love their enemies.  
To pick up a cross.

It all sounds against the norm, don't you think?

But when you read the Gospels carefully, that's what Jesus did. He said things that were odd, strange, went against the norm. For example, the norm in our society is to put family first. Right?

Careers, church, friendships—  
it's all important, but family comes first.

None of us really question that belief. Except when you read on in Mark's Gospel, Jesus questioned that belief.

Mark 3.32:

A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you."

And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

I wonder how his family felt, when they heard Jesus lump them in with everyone else??!!

Of course, that was part of what made Jesus so strange.

The way he defined who his family was.

The way he was determined to see everyone a child of God, as part of the same family.

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Tex Sample recalls the story of a Christian couple named Nathan and Louise DeGraffenreid.

They lived in Mason, Tennessee, and one morning, when Nathan stepped outside their house with a cup of coffee, he felt the point of a pistol barrel shoved into his back.

The man holding the gun directed Nathan to go back inside, and followed Nathan in.

The intruder was an escaped inmate from a Tennessee prison.

Once he and Nathan were inside the house, Nathan’s wife Louise confronted the intruder: not with a gun of her own, but with a direct order.

She told the man to put the gun down, because “We don’t allow no guns in this house.”

Then she told him she was going to fix him some coffee, bacon and eggs, and biscuits with gravy. He was to sit down without the gun while she prepared him breakfast.

Unbelievably, the escapee listened to Louise.

When the meal was ready, they all said grace and began to eat.

He told Louise that the breakfast was just like ones that his grandmother used to make.

But then police sirens began to approach and surround the house. The escapee shouted that they had found him, and went for his gun.

Louise stopped him again.

She told him he did not need his gun.

She instructed him to get behind her, and she instructed her husband to get behind the intruder, and told the intruder that this was how they were going to all walk out together, like a sandwich—Louise, escapee, Nathan—so that the police would not shoot.

She told the escapee that he would then turn himself over peacefully to the police. Which is exactly what happened. That couple, Louise and Nathan, may have saved that man's life.

And he had approached them as if he was willing to TAKE their lives.<sup>2</sup>

How did they do that?

I don't know if I could have done that.

It's not normal behavior.

Are you comfortable with that kind of behavior?

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<sup>2</sup> Tex Sample, *A Christian Justice for the Common Good*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

When someone really goes over the top, determined to show the radical and inclusive nature of God's love?

Bud Welch lost his only daughter, Julie, in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. His immediate response was that he wanted the bombers to die.

But over the course of time, he changed his mind. He even went to visit Tim McVeigh's father and family.

"I asked myself, 'What is it going to do for me if McVeigh and Nichols are executed?' I repeated the question for about three weeks and kept getting the same answer: Their deaths wouldn't help me one bit."

Not that Mr. Welch had actually FORGIVEN Tim McVeigh for what he did.

In an interview given before McVeigh's execution, Mr. Welch remarked, "I know I should forgive Timothy McVeigh. I hope I do before he dies."<sup>3</sup>

Now what was Bud Welch wrestling with?

Not just what he should and should not do. He was wrestling with the radical, inclusive, excessive love of God.

Which is what all of us wrestle with, in a thousand different decisions that we make every day:  
how we talk with someone, how we respond to someone,

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<sup>3</sup> "Oklahoma City Bombing: Two Fathers and Forgiveness", April 2000 Issue of St. Anthony Messenger Magazine Online, <http://www.americancatholic.org/messenger/Apr2000/feature2.asp>. I am indebted to an article by Stacy Rector, "Preaching the Cross and Confronting Capital Punishment," in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2014, for drawing my attention to this story.

what we do with our career, with our money,  
with our retirement...

The measuring stick is not—what's the norm?  
The measuring stick is love.

Of course, it's not a love that promises to keep us comfortable.  
After all, Jesus loved some people so much, instead of walking  
away from them, or ignoring them, or disowning them, he said things  
like:

You're spending your money the wrong way.  
You're practicing your faith the wrong way.  
You are ignoring and shutting out the very people whom God  
wants you to know...

And that got under some people's skin.  
The people who LIKED the way they spent their money,  
the people who had political power, religious power...

They got together and said: THIS GUY IS CRAZY!

He's dangerous. Let's get rid of him.  
And they did.

Now here's the really crazy part.  
When they plotted to destroy Jesus, Jesus said, "I still love you."  
When they decided to kill Jesus, Jesus said, "I forgive you."

Jesus said, "I'm going to die and be raised not just for my family  
and followers and friends...but also for you!"

So what do you think?  
Is that kind of love too over-the-top, too excessive?

Or is it the very reason you're sitting in these pews today?

(Amen.)