

“Binding Up the Strong Man”
 Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
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 Mark 3: 19-30

Jesus’s family—the *holy* family—want to restrain him because people are saying he is out of his mind—and they must think he is, too. The scribes—the religious experts—the ones who know what they are talking about—they say Jesus is possessed by the prince of demons, Beelzebul.

Jesus looks to be in desperate need of a P.R. firm to remake his image.

But there’s another data point that says, “No, he’s doing just fine on his own.” And that data point is the masses of people that are following him around. A few verses back in this same chapter, we hear about crowds—multi-ethnic, multi-religious crowds—following him. So many that Jesus tells his disciples to have a boat ready for him to jump into so he doesn’t get crushed.

These people are not just mildly interested. They want to get *real* close to Jesus. They want to *touch* Jesus. They are desperate to touch Jesus because he heals people.

People with physical diseases and people who they believed were possessed by demons or evil spirits. We’d probably call it seizures or mental illness but whatever it was, the person was taken over by it—they were not in their right mind.

And Jesus was healing people—by getting close to them—by touching them. He was putting them in their right minds. People could *see* he had *power*.

His family wants to *restrain* him. That’s a pretty tame way of saying it. A better translation is that they want to “seize him by force”. They see the power.

And the scribes see it, too. In their own way, they’re trying to restrain Jesus, too. They do that by questioning where his power comes from—and they make an attempt to undermine it. The scribes raise lots of questions about who Jesus really is.

But *nobody* questions that Jesus has power.

I wonder if we’re in an opposite time today. Maybe we know who Jesus is—we believe that part in the Creed that says Jesus is the Son of God. But maybe we’re *not* so sure about his power—not so sure about his power active now—in the world—today.

The Gospel that Jesus proclaims, in this story that Mark tells, is that the Reign of God—the Kingdom of God—has broken into this world through Jesus. It is obviously not here in full—but God has changed things up through Jesus. *The world is not the same*.

But *how* has it changed? What difference does Jesus make? I think that keeping our eyes open—and our hearts and minds open—to where we see God at work in the world is challenging. And I also think it is a potentially life-changing way to live. A life-changing way to live that begins with even a little morsel of faith—that God is active here and now.

Looking at who Jesus is, what he did and didn’t do helps sharpen our eyes, helps us recognize where and when God’s way is breaking in.

There are a couple of things from this story that might sharpen our eyes. In his challenge of the Pharisees, Jesus paints an extremely unsettling image of himself. He’s the stronger man who breaks into the house to tie up the strong man so he can plunder the house.

What? Really? Not sweet Jesus—breaking into a house and tying up someone so he can take everything in it?!

Jesus may need that P.R. firm after all.

This picture that Jesus paints of the Stronger Man tying up the Strong Man is a parable that Jesus is throwing alongside the misinformation campaign of the Pharisees. They acknowledge the power that Jesus has but they say his power is coming from Beelzebul. Jesus is an agent of the prince of demons. The world is a battleground between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The Pharisees pronounce Jesus on the side of evil.

Jesus tries logic with the Pharisees. He points out that that he's casting demons *out* of people—he's countering the work of Beelzebul—it makes no sense that Satan would cast out Satan. But logic often doesn't work—especially with people who are so threatened by you that they label you demonic.

So Jesus throws a parable into the mix—a story that is meant to be interpreted in more than one way. And a story that is meant for the crowds as well as for the Pharisees and his family.

One way of interpreting this parable is that Jesus has come into the world to restrain the forces that defy God and God's purposes for the world. It's another way of proclaiming the Gospel—that the kingdom of God—the reign of God—has broken into this world. Just like the Stronger Man breaks into the house, Jesus comes into the world. A world filled with sickness and division and people not being in their right minds. And Jesus breaks into all of this and shows that the power of all those forces that defy God *is not all powerful*.

I'm going to step away from the biblical story for a minute and throw another modern day parable alongside it—a story that is actually true.

Chris Buckley is a former Army sergeant who had three deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. He lives in Georgia now, with his wife and two young children. Like all of us, Chris has got a story, and some of it could be told through the tattoos that cover much of his body. There are KKK symbols, an anti-government militia tag and a big word in Arabic, "Infidel". Chris put that one on himself, while he was in Afghanistan. In his words, "I wanted them to know I was the one the imam warned them against."

Chris left the army with a broken back and an addiction to painkillers. When he was cut off from the prescription drugs, he started buying on the street. Jail came into the mix and unemployment and moving from place to place. They lived in areas where people were angry about same-sex marriage, Black Lives Matter and refugees "pouring into the country."

These people were feeling threatened—like their figurative house was being broken into and plundered.

In 2015, Chris joined the Klan. He can be seen in a Netflix documentary, along with his son, who was 4 at the time, dressed in his own pint-sized black robe, with a white rope tied at his waist and a red Klan cross around his neck. The two of them are shouting, "White Power!"

Chris used his military background to train other Klansman—teaching them how to use and conceal weapons, close-quarters fighting and surveillance—in his words, "Anything to keep your people safe." Like Chris, many in the Klan were addicted to drugs and high most of the time—and they were armed. Strong men. Keeping invaders out of their house.

Initially, Chris's wife supported his joining the Klan because she thought it might help straighten him out. But a few incidents involving their young son, made her realize she needed to get him out. She contacted a man—a former Nazi skin-head—whose work is now to get people out of the Klan.

This man worked with Chris over time—with some fits and starts—but he got him out. But getting him out wasn't the end of the story. He also worked at casting out that hatred that seemed to govern Chris's whole

approach to the world and everyone in it. He took Chris on a compassion tour of homeless shelters and gang rehab centers—and Love broke in and tied up that strong man of hate.

But Chris’s drug addiction got worse. Last summer he was arrested and went through detox during his sentence. And then after that he chose an intensive probationary program—and he has stayed well.

A few months ago, Chris’s guide—the one who had gotten him out of the Klan—decided Chris was ready for the final lesson. The most intense hatred Chris had was for Muslims—it was time to meet one.

They’d been texting and talking by phone for months, but Chris was still nervous as he waited to welcome Heval into his house. Heval is a cardiologist now but he’s known poverty far more extreme than the small house Chris and his family rent. He fled Syria as a boy, spent years in a refugee camp, and finally his family was given asylum in the U.S. in 2001.

For years, Heval has been serving people in need but after the 2016 election he has dedicated himself to a new mission: meeting as many Trump supporters as he could and being an “ambassador for all the hated ‘others’”.

When they meet, Chris extends his hand but Heval just can’t help himself and he gives him a huge bear hug. Before they eat, Chris takes Heval across the street to a place called the Haven. It’s an informal church that offers a hot meal to anyone who comes. This is where Chris puts his energy and time now. It’s a place where Love has broken in. A place where a Strong Man whose been bound can serve by binding up others.

Because when Jesus binds up a Strong Man it looks like this.

When we hear about him tying up the Strong Man, we have, in our minds, a picture of Jesus overpowering that man with force and binding him with big strong ropes. If we’re thinking about that Strong Man as all the evil forces that defy God being overpowered and stopped—it sure doesn’t look like that is happening.

But if binding up the Strong Man, looks more like binding up wounds—healing the hate out of people—it’s a different story. And it means that we look for Jesus to be breaking in in strange ways-- like through a Samaritan who binds up the wounds of someone who sees him as the enemy or a Syrian Muslim doctor who seeks out a relationship with a man who spent a life-time hating Muslims.

In my book, you can’t make up a story like this. The power of Jesus is real. And it’s breaking in. We just have to be on the lookout for it. In strange and unexpected ways.

Thanks be to God. Amen.