

Out of Our Minds  
June 10, 2012  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Mark 3:20-35

This week 154 years ago, Abraham Lincoln stood, long and tall, to make an address accepting his party's nomination to run for a senate seat representing Illinois. He would lose that famous race to Stephen Douglas, but his speech that day will never be forgotten. It stands as one of his three greatest, along with two he later made as president, the Gettysburg Address and his second inaugural.

But before he was president, Lincoln had slavery on his mind that day in 1858. He could see the nation was on an unsustainable course – tearing itself apart over what historians have come to call America's original sin. The Great Emancipator knew scripture backward and forward and he summoned a passage from the gospel of Mark to make a statement that would rally the north in its stand against slavery.

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new — North as well as South.

They don't write speeches like that anymore and, in this age of sound bites, social media and whatever comes next, they never will again. In his day, as he pondered the U.S. as a "house divided, Lincoln and many other Americans could see the Civil War on the horizon. Today our American house is torn over other issues – but they are just as divisive - the Grand Canyon that exists between the haves and have-nots, extreme political polarization, wedge social issues such as abortion and sexuality, the role of government versus the freedom of the individual, the size of a costly military and on and on. We will be reminded of those divisions far too many times this summer and fall as we move toward the fall elections.

But in all respect to President Lincoln, Mark's original point in chapter 3 was not about the fate of nations, at least primarily. No, the gospel writer was more focused on the fate

of individuals. And it all started with an accusation by Jesus' family, of all people, that Jesus was himself "out of his mind."

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Jesus, you see, had been on a roll. In Mark's gospel, there is no long wind-up to Jesus' activity – not the exhaustive genealogy that opens Matthew, nor the birth narrative of Mark, nor the poetry that opens John. No, in Mark, Jesus calls disciples and he heals a man with an unclean spirit, a woman with a fever and a leper ... all in just the first chapter. Then, in the second chapter, Jesus offends the Pharisees by eating with a tax collector and raising questions about old, scared traditions, such as fasting and keeping the Sabbath.

No wonder that, by then, a crowd had begun to follow Jesus around. And, no wonder, according to Mark, that Jesus' family was flummoxed as to what to do with him. Scholars who have studied the original text have concluded that it was Jesus' own family who called him a little mad.

Perhaps they were trying to protect him by removing him from the crowd. Perhaps they were trying to separate themselves from him and his controversial actions. Or, maybe, they were actually starting to wonder if Jesus was a bit off his rocker. After all, who would, suddenly upon turning 30, take out across the countryside, performing miracles and healings, crossing cultural boundaries, offending the religious and the governmental authorities, thus making both new friends and new enemies as fast as possible.

Someone yells, "He has gone out of his mind." The Greek word that Mark uses for "out of his mind" *could* be read to mean 'amazed' or 'astonished by miraculous or extraordinary events.' But that is more a secondary definition, and it's not what the crowd was thinking. There is no sugar-coating it. They thought Jesus was, shall we say, "not right" . . . as in "not in his right mind." He had, they concluded, lost his capacity to reason normally.

Stop and think about what the disciples must have been thinking? Just a few days before, this man who was the talk of the countryside handpicked each of them and said "follow me." Whether it was Jesus' sheer charisma, a snap decision on their part that he was the Messiah, a nudge from the Holy Spirit or just the prospect of an adventure, whatever it was, they had walked away from their jobs, families and livelihoods to follow this man. Now he was being called crazy, even by those closest to him. Surely the disciples could feel the eyes of the crowd on them, too, as the apostles of this allegedly crazy man.

Maybe in our own ways some of us know a little of what that feels like. A Caldwell member told me this week how a friend had observed her deepening involvement with the church. This member had joined Caldwell two years ago. She had volunteered to serve on two committees and had just accepted a new, even larger responsibility.

The friend didn't spare any words, "Why are you getting so involved in that church?"

"Well," the member responded, "I've been looking for a church like this for 30 years and had never found it. I have some catching up to do."

I'm sure she is not alone. Many of you probably have friends who observe your commitment to church: Maybe it's how you can never do anything on Wednesday night because that's choir practice. Or how you arrive here just after sun-up on Sunday morning to make breakfast for our neighbors in Caldwell House. Or how you put in so many days volunteering at Merry Oaks elementary or the bilingual preschool. Maybe it's your devotion to teaching our children. Or, if you are an elder, how you give many hours every month for your duties on the session.

Maybe some of you have friends who wonder why you spend so much social time with your Caldwell friends. Or, maybe from time to time, some of you tell a friend that you can't afford a nice trip or even a meal out with them, when, you know in your heart, the reason is that you've already pledged to give that money to God's work.

"Why not ease up on this church business?" they may be thinking. "Let yourself go, they say. Spend your money on other things – the church doesn't really need it. Sleep in on Sunday morning. And why all that concern for the poor. The government will take care of them.

"Enough also with your belief that justice can be achieved for the marginalized and the weak. It'll never happen. That's just not the way the world - or America - works. It's just the way things are -- always have been, always will be.

"Stop trying to live up to what that Jesus guy said. You can't really do all the things he commanded. You don't really think that the kingdom of God is going to happen down here, do you. Look around, for Pete's sake."

"What's your problem, anyway," they may say. "Are you out of your mind?"

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I've shared the story of Flannery O'Connor with you once before. The famed southern novelist from Georgia was spending time in New York among the stars of the literary and cultural universe, titans of business, politics and power. A devout Catholic, she is said to have talked about her faith with someone at a cocktail party. Later, after observing how they treated her differently after that, she said, "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you odd."

We live in a day, at least in America, when "nones" are the fastest growing segment among religions. That's not "n-u-n." It's "n-o-n-e," as in what people indicate on surveys asking what religion they practice.

We live in a day when it is increasingly popular, especially among young people, to say that one is "spiritual but not religious." We live in a day when it is easy and even popular to badmouth organized religion, a day when many find it more convenient to adopt their own self-made orthodoxy. We also live in a day when making any religious claim at all is likely to draw criticism from someone accusing us of imposing a belief system on them.

To stand fast for Christ and his body, the church, we have to be at least a little out of our minds, don't we? And we should want to be, I think. We should want to be out of *our* minds and *in* the mind of Christ, as risky as that may be. Again, our friends may say that's an impossible aspiration. We may even think that on some days. I know I do. And, to be sure, we should be humble and unassuming about any effort to be Christ-like.

But it is not an *inappropriate* aspiration, and we have been given a way, namely the gift of the Holy Spirit, to follow it. In his letter to the early Christians forming a church in the city of Corinth, the Apostle Paul offers that same encouragement.

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. <sup>13</sup> This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. <sup>14</sup> The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to that person, and they cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. <sup>15</sup> Spiritual people make judgments about all things, but they themselves are subject to any one's judgment:

<sup>16</sup> "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?"

But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:12-16)

“The mind of Christ.”

“We have the mind of Christ.” Good news. Scary news. Through the Spirit, by drawing close to our creator and knowing our creator’s words and deeds and death and resurrection, we “have the mind of Christ.”

That means we know what to do and how to act in the world. It means turning the other cheek and loving our enemies. It means speaking truth to power and standing against tradition when tradition has come to exist for its own sake. It means taking risk for the church. It means humbling ourselves before our God and each other. Most of all, it means putting our total trust in God, as Jesus did, even in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his death.

If that is what the crowd meant that day when they said Jesus was “out of his mind,” then maybe the crowd was exactly right. As Mark tells the story, Jesus was just getting started. He needed to get out of his human mind and into God’s, and we need to get out of ours and into Christ’s.

Every step we take in that direction is an advance against what Christ called Satan, what we might call evil in the world, in all its forms. Every step in that direction gets us closer to being that strong man – or woman – who cannot be bound. Every step we take that way is a step closer to the day when our house cannot be divided.

May God ordain our path and guide us by the Holy Spirit that we can, by God’s mercy, be out of our minds and in the mind of Christ.

Amen.