

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Mark 3:20-35

Is the right thing ever the wrong thing? The ethicists' dilemma. What makes something good or bad and when do the lines blur? I've been reading this book called, *"When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself. When Helping Hurts* embarks on an explanation of how to do mission work alongside people rather than to people. How can I help someone without damaging their dignity even further and without raising my own God-complex? Author Steve Corbett relays a parable that was told by an African Christian about the realities of short-term mission trips to his country. The story goes:

Elephant and Mouse were best friends. One day Elephants said, "Mouse, let's have a party!" Animals gathered around from far and near. They ate. They drank. They sang. And they danced. And nobody celebrated more and danced harder than Elephant. After the party was over, Elephant exclaimed, "Mouse, did you ever go to a better party? What a blast!" But Mouse did not answer. "Mouse, where are you?" Elephant called. He looked around for the friend, and then shrank back in horror. There at Elephant's feet lay mouse. His little body ground into the dirt. He had been smashed by the big feet of his exuberant friend, Elephant.

'Sometimes this is what it is like to do mission work with you Americans,' The African storyteller commented. 'It is like dancing with an Elephant.'"

When I read this story, I was struck—first, in light of our own Youth Workcamps and how our Brethren programming might play into this sad parable. But also, I was just struck by hearing the other side of the story. In my mind, of course, mission trips are a good thing—these are people setting aside some of their time, often vacation time, to go build homes and churches, to lead Vacation Bible Schools and to host day cares. What could be bad about all that good stuff? Well, apparently, sometimes our exuberance can crush the dignity of the locals. Author Steve Corbett reassures us that there are good ways to do short term mission trips, but we just have to pay closer attention to the dignity of those we serve, and maybe pay closer attention to the way we are being served.

Is the right thing ever the wrong thing? Apparently. Even something that seems so good and noble can have its dark side. So, it causes me to wonder what I participate in with rose colored glasses, convinced of its goodness but blind to its effects.

In our scripture this morning, there are two groups of people that are convinced of the rightness of their intentions, convinced that they are on the side of good only to be stunned by the words of Jesus.

At the opening of Mark 3:20-35, we are introduced to the family of Jesus, his mother and siblings. The family has received word that the crowds are gathering around Jesus so much, that they are not even able to eat. Now, that sounds like something for Jesus' Mom to be concerned about, not eating enough. That seems to be the eternal mothering stereotype. There is plenty of gap-filling that must take place for us to figure out why the crowds concern Jesus' family so much, but Mark tells us that they go to take charge of him because, "he's out of his mind." Things have gotten just too ridiculous, too big, too fast. We've got to go slow Jesus down before he makes a big mistake, a public mistake, a mistake that could ruin our family. I believe the

family is convinced they are about to do the right thing. In taking charge of Jesus, they believe it's in his best interest. So off they go to Jesus. The family of Jesus is the first of our two groups convinced they are setting off to do the right thing.

Then we are introduced to the second group convinced they are doing the right thing—the teachers of the law. In the midst of this crowded home, where Jesus can't even eat, the teachers of the law level this harsh criticism before Jesus: "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." This miracle worker is clearly dangerous to the religious status quo and the teachers clearly see it as their responsibility to protect their faith and rid the good Jewish people of this radical nuisance. So, they name Jesus' powers as demonic.

In the way I've talked about these two groups, Jesus' family and the teachers of the law, maybe I've given them the benefit of the doubt. But I do believe that in their minds, they were setting out on noble, right causes to protect their special institutions from Jesus' ministry. One: the institution of family was under threat as rumors would begin to spread about this radical family member. Two: the institution of Jewish religion was under threat as some new prophet attempts to reinterpret tradition while wooing followers with healings and miracles. Think about that carefully. What allegiances would you have drawn and considered right? Allegiance to your family and the traditions of your faith seem wise to me.

But, of course, we then get to hear Jesus' take on the situation. First, he confronts the Teachers of the Law and their accusations that he summons his powers from Beelzebul, the devil, in order to cast out demons. Dismantling their argument, he asks why would the devil work against his own cause by casting out demons. If these teachers of the law want to talk about this darker under-layer faith, then they better be ready to examine their own forces of evil that have convinced them to turn a blind eye to goodness and filled their hearts with skepticism and anger.

Then, he turns to his family and redefines his family as all those who do God's will. While sounding like a rejection of his biological kin, Commentator Timothy Geddert also sees this as an invitation to his family to come into the inner circle and become a part of an even greater institution than biological family.¹

For the sake of what institutions in your life would you rush to Jesus and confront him before he dismantled it? This is what author of *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett, does with the institution of Short Term Mission trips. We might go to Jesus and tell him that, we are helping people on these trips, and Jesus might expose our blindness and say, "Except when you hurt their sense of worth, their pride, and their work ethic." With which institutions are we so enamored that we have ignored Jesus' call to reinterpret?

As Jesus flips the institutions of Judaism and family on their heads, would he do the same with our construct of Church, our jobs, our democracy, our economy, or our neighborhood—even as we cling to keeping them on our terms?

If Jesus exposed to us a way that we do church, right here at HCOB, as being unjust or not right, would we listen to him and change, or do we love our institution too much? Institution over Jesus?

In between these admonitions of institutions, Jesus pronounces in verses 24-26 some familiar words about division. He says, "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come." Some of you might know these lines better as the words of Abraham Lincoln as he addressed a divided country, North and South,

¹ Geddert, Timothy. *Believer's Church Commentary: Mark*. Herald Press, 2001. p 86.

before the Civil War. Lincoln's command of the scripture for this purpose is certainly striking and appropriate. A nation holding on to too many competing institutions cannot work together as one nation, it will crumble.²

Likewise, Jesus knows that his audience cannot have too many competing allegiances, or else the future church would crumble. And this sounds almost cruel that family and religious tradition can compete and get in the way of the aims of Jesus. But they do. He tells us we must be willing to leave our family behind for the call of discipleship; we must be willing to leave our citizenship behind for the call of the Kingdom of God; and we must be willing to leave the comforts and safety networks of our faith community in order to heed the call to mission. It sounds almost cruel that Jesus would admonish such institutions that were created for goodness, but if those of us in the church are more committed to our institutions than we are to Jesus, then the church crumbles. We may not know that we are divided, but our purposes and our aims are; and we must gather around our one true purpose that is discipleship to Jesus.

Is the right thing ever the wrong thing? Yes. Even good things can keep us from the greater good if we cling to them instead of Jesus. So, do not be divided in your purposes and may God guide our Church local and large to a single unified allegiance in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln%27s_House_Divided_Speech