

Semicontinuous
1 Sam. 8:4–11,
16–20
Ps. 138

Complementary
Gen. 3:8–15
Ps. 130
2 Cor. 4:13–5:1
Mark 3:20–35

Dividing the House

Goal for the Session *Through Jesus’ challenging words to religious leaders and his family, adults will identify and address contemporary allegiances that restrain discipleship.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Mark 3:20–35

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Judith Hoch Wray

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WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Wendy Farley

If we transpose this theological vision into our own time, instead of lepers and demoniacs crowding around Jesus, we might see the strange bodies of the disabled. The only ones not in the picture, the ones not pressing in at the doors and windows, desperate and aching to be near Jesus, are the ones who think they know what religion and family life is supposed to look like. Jesus, infinitely patient with the crowd, blasts away at these people. Everyone will be forgiven, except people who blaspheme the Holy Spirit. The inability to tell the difference between the power of the Holy Spirit and the demonic is an *unforgivable sin*.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Don E. Saliers

For us, however, the issue is how we now understand the relationship between discipleship and Christology. More than simply “understand” intellectually, it seems crucial for the churches today to seek to live out that understanding. Living out the form of discipleship Christ bids us follow means a new solidarity with all of humanity. It requires that we learn with him to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice. It asks us to live into the densities of human joy and suffering. It calls us to find ourselves precisely in our willingness to give up our self-absorption. This is a demanding task, requiring a willingness to follow him into a new solidarity with God’s whole family.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Nibs Stroupe

We should look for the reality signified by the name “Satan.” Satan does not necessarily mean a personality with horns and a red tail, but it does name a demonic power that is actively engaged against the compassionate and reconciling love of God. This is the reality that Jesus names here, and whether we believe in a person named “Satan” is not as important as hearing about our captivity to the powers of evil signified by “Satan,” powers that continue to seek our allegiance.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Mark 3:20–35

Focus on Your Teaching

All adults face multiple allegiances tugging for priority in their lives: faith, family, work, political, self-care. Such allegiances often grow out of relationships with those experienced as authorities in their lives. But what happens when those authorities summon adults to act in ways seen as conflicting with allegiances felt as more pressing? Today's text explores two related encounters in which Jesus speaks hard words to religious authorities and his own family. Older adults may find this narrative more disturbing than young adults, who may themselves be in the midst of challenging allegiances and authorities from their past.

Guiding Spirit, fill me in this session's preparation and leadership with your wisdom. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for June 13, 2021

For Responding

- option 2: paper, pens
- option 3: Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, print out the two questions for small groups to discuss in Exploring to distribute at the appropriate time.

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any guests or newcomers.

Have adults choose partners. Direct each participant to tell his or her partner one thing he or she hopes to accomplish this summer, and at the same time relate any priorities or commitments that might stand in the way of carrying through with that hope. After a few minutes, ask the pairs to discuss briefly in general terms how they resolve conflicting priorities and allegiances in their lives and families.

Gather the whole group. Invite each pair to relate one insight about dealing with conflicting priorities and commitments.

Explain that today's focus text presents a set of encounters in which Jesus addresses conflicting priorities and commitments that pose potential hindrances to ministry with those closest to him.

Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

Gracious God, we gather as your people. As such, may we be gracious in our speaking and in our listening, and in our openness to having our lives shaped and reshaped by you. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Hallmarks of Mark). Explain that Mark's Gospel will provide the focus text for this and the next four sessions. Direct participants to silently read the

In Mark, the conspiracy to destroy Jesus does not wait until Passion Week when Jesus cleanses the temple (Luke 19:47). Mark sets the conspiracy's initiation at the outset of Jesus' ministry after a confrontation with religious leaders (Mark 3:6).

material. Have adults identify insights that strike them as important. Encourage adults to keep this background material in mind as they proceed through this session and the following four.

Form three groups and assign each group one of the following identities: Jesus' family, the scribes from Jerusalem, and the crowd. Distribute the questions below, prepared before the session, to each group. Ask each group to read Mark 3:20–35 to themselves. Then have each group explore how their characters might have experienced this encounter. In particular, focus the conversation on these questions:

- ✧ What prior allegiances color your experience of this encounter?
- ✧ What does this encounter reveal to you about Jesus and your relationship/allegiance to him?

Gather the groups together. Invite the groups to report on their characters' view of this encounter, highlighting their thoughts on the two questions regarding prior allegiances and what has been revealed here of Jesus. Discuss the similarities and differences between the perceptions of these characters, and how allegiances play into those perceptions.

Explore more deeply how Jesus' family and the scribes respond to Jesus. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Mark 3:20–35) and have people read the "What?" excerpt. Consider especially the interpretation of the RSV of the charge that Jesus is "beside himself." Ask:

- ✧ Do you hear that as the family seeking to protect Jesus or as trying to get him under control? Why?

Read the sidebar on the timing in Mark of the conspiracy to destroy Jesus. Ask:

- ✧ How might this help us understand the scribes' attempt to demonize Jesus?

Discuss the consequences on the family's and scribes' responses to Jesus on his authority as well as the allegiance any may consider placing in him as a disciple.

Ask the adults to listen to the text now, not as one of the characters within it—but as who they are as participants in a faith community and as members of a family, and all the loyalties and allegiances that come with both. Invite adults to close their eyes, then read the text aloud. If you feel comfortable doing so, read the dialogue portions with dramatic affect in your voice. Invite participants to open their eyes. Have them call out words or phrases that stood out—or feelings evoked—as they listened. As participants listen to the text from their own perspective, invite them to reflect silently on the following:

- ✧ What does this passage reveal about conflicting allegiances that might become stumbling blocks for discipleship?

Single out verse 35. Ask adults to consider how Jesus' words here might shape their understanding and practice of discipleship, particularly when the allegiance that discipleship claims comes into conflict with other allegiances they hold (or that hold them) in life.

**EASY
PREP**

Be sensitive to how some adults may respond when “family” is included in the conversation regarding allegiances that may restrain discipleship. “Family values” can be a line in the sand, even when it comes to priorities of faith.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

- 1. Good Versus Higher Good** Even allegiances we value highly may stand in the way of faithful discipleship. Form small groups. Have each group create a role play in which allegiance to one’s family or religious tradition comes into conflict with discipleship. For example, perhaps an urgent service need conflicts with a regular family outing. Do the role plays, then discuss what they revealed about how things we rightly value as good can hinder our following of Jesus. Challenge adults to bring this awareness into their choices in the coming week that may involve prioritizing one good over another.
- 2. Taking It Personally** Amending allegiances that might inhibit discipleship begins by identifying them and what authority they carry in our lives. Distribute paper and pens. Have adults list the most important allegiances in their lives. Alongside each, describe what makes that allegiance important—and how it might, intentionally or unintentionally, restrain some aspect of their discipleship. Have them consider how these allegiances are playing out in general—and how they might need to be changed or amended for the sake of following Jesus with greater faithfulness. Invite them to write one or two changes they wish to make. Encourage participants to revisit this list each day this week.
- 3. With Whom Do We Stand?** Addressing and amending our allegiances for the sake of discipleship may involve us in deeper relationships with some we have not stood with before. Read the “So What” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Identify those we naturally tend to “stand with” in terms of missional and service engagements—and those with whom we find it difficult to do so. Discuss how the excerpt’s emphasis on a “new solidarity” challenges us as individuals and communities of faith to take on new partners. Encourage each adult in the coming week to consider one new person with whom they will stand as an expression of discipleship.

CLOSING

Gather adults in a circle. Invite them to recall first their initial conversations with partners regarding a hope for this summer, and competing priorities that might stand in its way, and then bring to mind the conversations regarding allegiances in Exploring and Responding. Have participants identify one insight or question regarding discipleship and our varied allegiances that has come to them during the course of this session. If they feel comfortable doing so, have them further indicate how that insight or question will be brought to bear on their practice of discipleship in the coming week. If you used option 2 in Responding, encourage participants to use the list created in it as a daily spiritual discipline for examining allegiances that may need amending to further our discipleship.

Close the session by praying the Lord’s Prayer.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for June 13, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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Hallmarks of Mark

The Gospel of Mark

A Gospel of Action

The Gospel of Mark is distinguished, particularly in its first half, by an almost continuous series of actions by Jesus that demonstrate Mark's theme announced in the Gospel's first verse: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." There are no extended theological discourses as in John's Gospel. While there are parables in Mark, they do not compare in number to those found in Matthew or Luke.

A Gospel of Power and Authority

Mark explores what power and authority make Jesus' actions possible. Jesus' teaching is viewed as uniquely authoritative (1:22). His power over demonic forces, who themselves confess him to be the Holy One of God, stirs recognition of Jesus' power among the crowds (1:27). The narrative of Jesus' stilling the storm (4:35–41) witnesses to the power of God at work through Jesus. Such power as Jesus exercises, however, is not coercively forced on others. Unbelief creates a hurdle for what even the power and authority of Jesus can do (6:1–6).

A Gospel of Controversy

Mark's "beginning of the good news" is constantly beset with controversy and conflict with would-be recipients. Barely midway through the second chapter, Jesus offends religious authorities by consorting with those dismissed as sinners (2:16). Far from attempting to smooth over ruffled feathers, Jesus exacerbates the situation by a retort to their rebuke of him (2:17). Confrontations over Sabbath keeping quickly result in a conspiracy of some religious leaders to destroy Jesus (3:6).

A Gospel of Urgency

In Mark's Gospel, things often happen "immediately." Literally. The Spirit *immediately* drives Jesus into the wilderness following baptism (1:12). When Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, they *immediately* leave their nets and follow (1:17–18). When Jesus touches and speaks to a leper, the disease leaves the victim *immediately* (1:42). "Immediately" conveys a sense of urgency to this Gospel, and the response evoked by the "beginning of the gospel" that is Mark's theme.

A Gospel Open-Ended

Mark leaves much untold. There are no birth narratives. There are no sermons on mounts or plains. But most significantly, according to the oldest manuscripts, the Easter narrative in Mark ends abruptly—"and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). These accounts leave it to the reader and hearer to decide how Easter ends—that is, how the opening verse's "beginning of the good news" finds its way out into the world, if at all.

Take this last theme as the starting point for your entry into Mark. In the passages you will encounter this session, what ending is yet to be written—not by disciples of long ago, but by you, and the people in your group? How will you engage in the actions, and face the controversies, and rely on the power, and respond to the urgency, of the "beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ?"