

**Sunday, June 10 and Wednesday, June 13 + 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**Mark 3:20-35; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1**

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI

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Suicide. Once upon a time this was a taboo subject. But no more, because it affects so many people, more each year. I am pretty sure that each one of us here has been touched in some way by a suicide, whether of a family member, a friend, a friend's child, an associate, or a celebrity. This past week alone we were shocked by the back-to-back suicides of fashion designer Kate Spade and food critic Anthony Bourdain. Kate Spade, beloved because she rejected pretense and built her brand on the basics; and Tony Bourdain, beloved because he set his culinary escapades around the globe within the larger context of fearless commentary on the human condition.

None of us can know what complex of factors leads a person to that point, and then compels them to follow through. But I thought something Kate Spade's husband Andy said shortly after her death provides a clue.

"There was no indication and no warning that she would do this," he said. "It was a complete shock. And it clearly wasn't her. There were personal demons she was battling."

Personal demons. How often have you heard it said of people dealing with serious depression and anxiety, "She is fighting her inner demons"?

Inner demons? What does that mean? Our Gospel reading today takes us there.

But first we have to set the stage.

Last week, we talked about how, especially in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' entry into human history is not a sign of peace but an incursion into a world that is held captive by Satan. Again and again, as we move through Mark, we are going to encounter stories of spiritual warfare. Jesus's mission on earth in Mark is to reclaim our lives by overthrowing power structures and systems that keep people from living fully as God desires. In place of these controlling systems, Jesus proclaims the reign of God—the advent of God's kingdom, one that is ruled not by oppression but by love resting on the twin pillars of mercy and grace—unconditional love, and forgiveness that we do not deserve but receive anyway because God loves us that much.

Here in Mark 3, the power structure in question is that of the Jewish scribes.

This is only the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but already he has been casting out demons and performing miraculous healings. Massive crowds have begun to follow him everywhere. At the beginning of today's reading Jesus goes home, but the hordes follow him there, too. His family has no idea what is going on. Probably terrified, they think he is beside himself, that he is not in his right mind.

Then the scribes show up. Scribes were the theological heavyweights who represented the authority of the Jewish temple. They pronounce that Jesus is acting on behalf of Satan, not of God, saying that he casts out demons by the authority that comes from the Satan, the ruler of demons. This is the worst condemnation of Jesus they could make: Instead of doing God's work, they announce that he is doing the devil's work.

Jesus quickly reveals the absurdity of the scribes' position. How can Satan cast out Satan? Instead, he makes the point in a short and violent parable that it is up to him to lead the revolt against these powers and bring their rule to an end.

In this parable, Jesus characterizes himself as the one who can overwhelm Satan's reign by "tying up the strong man," meaning Satan, and plundering the things this so-called man has taken for himself—meaning all those who are held in bondage by the terrible power of sin.

This takes us back to inner demons.

First we must acknowledge that we, too, are among those held captive. We are still living in a world where systems of oppression have the upper hand. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we all have inner demons lurking somewhere within us. They are always working on us to make their voices heard and sometimes they succeed. Some call this "self-talk." One psychologist has written that "human nature is prone to negative self-talk, making sweeping assertions like 'I can't do anything right!' or 'I'm a complete failure!' [the writer continues,] We know this negativity can be unrealistic or even harmful, but we do it anyway." The question that most people don't ask is: Why?

When we are under stress, a single misstep can lead to disappointment, which can lead to general discouragement, which can then pave the way for despair—that ultimate condition in which all hope is lost—and where, I can only assume, people who are about to purposely end their lives find themselves.

The key is to not lose hope. Easier said than done? Not really. For Christians, because our faith rests entirely on hope. Hope is the confidence in that which we cannot see but which we know to be true. In a nutshell, this is the conviction that God loves us so much that God was willing to send his only Son to a horrible death, who took on himself the full weight of all our sin. This was so that in his victory over the forces of death, we are released into the fullness of the life God desires for us. All this out of love. “What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul, what wondrous love is this, O my soul!”

The one who accomplishes this is stronger than the strong man in the parable: Jesus, who won the ultimate victory of life over Satan. Knowing this, we hear from Paul in our second reading today, we do not lose heart, even in the midst of life’s anxieties. Day by day this conviction grows within us imperceptibly and strengthens our faith. Paul writes, “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”

What I hope and pray for all who are driven toward despair by whatever circumstances, by whatever inner demons momentarily get the upper hand, is that they somehow may find the strength and resolve to raise their eyes and look even for a moment beyond the crushing world of pain. As Paul writes, “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” Amen.