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## *Who Are Our Mothers, Sisters and Brothers?*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**Proper 5 – Year B**

'There is something in every human being,' claimed the mystical theologian Howard Thurman, 'there is something that every human being is waiting, waiting, waiting to hear.' And when we hear it, he declared, the best kinds of things can happen between human beings; even Godly things can happen. But until we hear it, he maintained, we are testing ourselves and checking out others to see if it's there. Waiting, waiting, waiting, he said; and testing, checking, seeking, he claimed: seeking to find out if it's there. That one true thing, he declared, is "the sound of the genuine." The sound of the genuine, he called it, and he claimed that every one of us is waiting to hear that sound in ourselves, and also waiting to hear that sound in others. "And when these two sounds come together," he concluded, "this is the music God heard when God said, 'Let us make [humanity] in our image.'" [\[i\]](#)

That declaration makes Thurman one of my favorite humanistic theologians; for me one of the best of those who combined being both a humanist and a theologian. We're all on a quest, he maintained; a quest to belong to humanity, and to connect with one another as God intended in our creation. And today—on this Sunday after Pentecost and after Trinity Sunday last week, today with our gospel reading appointed for this Second Sunday after Pentecost: today we get a reading that highlights this quest in a particular way. I think it's a way that is keenly compelling and appropriate for our time: for this time in our lives as a people and a nation; and indeed as a global community. Let me tell you what I hear the Spirit saying to the churches today.

Our portion of Mark's gospel assigned for today begins at verse 20; Mark chapter 3, verse 20. But in verse 19, just before our reading begins, we get the big picture; the context of it all. Verse 19 reads: 'Then Jesus went home.' Once we get that context, some interesting implications appear. Jesus has come to his hometown to minister to people with his particular mission, as Mark describes that mission. In the preceding verses Mark tells us that had appointed 12 disciples 'to be with him, and to proclaim his message, and to have authority to cast out demons' (Mark 3.14-15). And then he comes to his hometown, and what happens?

What happens is what Thurman said we people do: test for the genuine. We're on a quest to hear the sound of the genuine in ourselves, and to hear the sound of the genuine in others. Testing, checking, probing to find out. Are we 'for real,' what's really in us, do we have what it takes, are we the real thing? Or rather is something counterfeit going on, something unreliable and suspect? Do we need to be concerned or can we trust what is happening in this situation?

We first see this line of enquiry occur with the crowds who are following Jesus so intensely, the scripture tells us, that he and disciples "could not even eat." People are flocking to him because he appears to be genuine: someone who can really set people free from demonic possession.

The next occasion for this question arises with Jesus' own family, who set out to "restrain him," the reading says, "for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind'" (Mark 3:20-21). Is he in his right mind, the family wonders, and so they go to find him and check if he's genuine or deranged.

Then a third category of characters arrives on the scene to probe the question. Some scribes come from Jerusalem to challenge Jesus about his exorcisms. He's demon possessed himself, they charge, and "by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons" (Mark 3.22). That prompts Jesus to defend his exorcisms as Godly and not demonic; as genuine and not counterfeit; as the real thing and not a trick or deception.

"How can Satan cast out Satan?" he retorts. "If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand." Then he concludes, "But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered" (Mark 3:23, 25, 27). Thus he represents himself as a genuine rescuer who can bind your strong antagonist and even plunder his property on your behalf or in a righteous cause.

Now it's at this point in the story that Jesus turns the tables on his interrogators, and even on us as the gospel begins to imply how we too are implicated by the story.

Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin-- for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit" (Mark 3:28-30).

Right here we're invited to imagine what it may have been like for Jesus, hearing the sound of the genuine in himself as he was diligently setting people free through the power of the Holy Spirit. Knowing his own authenticity, and seeing how people are truly being healed and restored, he is then has to hear that other voice of his detractors slandering that very Spirit that empowers him by calling it demonic. What we need, in order to credit the ferocious terms that Jesus uses, is to imagine what it felt like to be so intimate with Holy Spirit and then hear that Spirit called "unclean" (vs. 30), "the ruler of demons" (vs. 22), and something that has driven him "out of his mind" (vs. 21).

In this passage Jesus invokes what has come to be called the 'unforgiveable sin.' But I ask us to reframe it as the most unacceptable ingratitude. We are more likely to register its impact on Jesus when he calls it an "eternal sin." With this word, "eternal," it's as if he is hearkening back to the beginning of time and creation, and invoking the opening verses of the Book of Genesis where the Spirit is giving birth to all things including us. And then to hear that most awesome, loving and life-giving Spirit maligned as demonic and unclean! Wow! That's like someone heaping abuse on the person who gave them birth and nurture. 'Truly,' Jesus responds, 'people will be forgiven for all manner of things they do and foul things they say, but this one is over the line' (vss. 28-29).

Now I think what's really at stake in this passage is not what might or might not be considered unforgiveable. Rather, what's more crucial to explore is the question: Is there something inside, or available to us, that is so key or so crucial to who we are that to dishonor that thing is to risk losing oneself for all eternity?

But today's gospel does not fixate or get mired on that question. Rather, there's something more important for us to hear about today. Given the state of affairs in our country and around the world, it's more needful that we resume the story of Jesus' family waiting outside to carry him away. Then, the scripture says, when his mothers and brothers arrived they sent him a message through the crowd sitting around him. "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you," he replied:

"Who are my mother and my brothers?"

And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:31-35).

Now with that claim Jesus has turned the tables on all his detractors. Indeed, it's a claim that goes beyond them and beyond his own family to include all of us as we seek the sound of the genuine in ourselves and in others. Here I want to restate that claim first in humanist terms, and then return to the sacred, theological terms as Jesus announced it.

Humanistically speaking: With whom are you most intimate, so that you can trust that they will join with you in your most fulfilling missions and projects? Who are the most reliable people in your life, that you can expect them to be genuine as a family in helping you do the things that most matter to you? Who are the people you are sure to be family with you in the most life-giving, affirming and rewarding ventures of your life?

And now in theological terms: Who do you find doing the will of God in the world, in ways that are so life-giving and nurturing that you can see genuine outcomes that are holy and righteous in your perspective? With whom can you find such nurture and care that you would entrust them to be 'beloved community' with you and for you as you go about in the world? Who would qualify as holy family members with you, as a mother and father, sister and brother, in your own ventures to bring about God's 'peaceable kingdom' or divine milieu or righteous reign as you see yourself called to assist?

Here it might be helpful to conclude with a contemporary story of someone seeking the reign of God in our

current day context. It came to me last month by way of Facebook. Now I know a providential act of God when I see one! If ever there was a time to pay attention to a Facebook story this was it, ha-ha!! Here's what I read from one of my Facebook friends who posted with heartfelt pathos.

She gave a painful description of being rejected by her family for being too vocal and visible as a social justice activist. One of her family member declared that my friend had betrayed her parents by her political commitments and public protests. My friend wrote that 'I was standing up for what God promises can be the right outcome for our country, but my family was demanding that I back down and apologize.' She concluded with a cry of the heart, vowing to continue to witness for righteousness, as she understood righteousness, regardless of losing the love of her family.

Now as it happens my friend and I have in common another Facebook friend who is also a clergyperson. And he replied to her post, remarkably, by quoting today's gospel verses about Jesus' family seeking to restrain him. "If it helps any," he began, Jesus had the same problem . . . As painful as it might be," he continued, "Jesus realized that his followers would have to find a new community among themselves greater than family." And then he concluded his comment by offering our common friend this personal benediction:

May you find comfort on the road with those of us who admire you for following your good and necessary work in the world.

And with that blessing my clergy friend showed-up as a brother to our sister as she shared her suffering estrangement from her natural family. And so I now turn to ask all of us, where are we finding that "new community" that Jesus calls us all to cultivate as a greater family alongside our natural family—a spiritual family of mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, cousins and adoptees?

Now, at the risk of offering more than one sermon here today I can't restrain myself from including the observance the many other Christians around the world are honoring today: Corpus Christi (meaning Body of Christ in Latin), or the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ as our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers call it.

However, our Episcopal and other Protestant church readings today observe the Second Sunday after Pentecost, which we celebrated two weeks ago of course. Now what I like about this difference is the way that our Episcopal or Protestant scripture readings appointed for today converge with the Corpus Christi theme of our Roman Catholic friends. As a sometime Anglo-Catholic myself, I appreciate that Mark's gospel at the end of chapter 3 gives us a kind of echo of the sacramental body and blood of Christ, by invoking the image of people doing the will of God as Christ's corporate body or family.

Now I am not the only one who has observed how the apostle Paul linked the sacramental or eucharistic body and blood of Christ with the metaphor of our ecclesial or corporate church identity as the body of Christ. One commentator goes so far as to call this connection, "Paul's Tricky Use of 'Body' in the Lord's Supper," where Paul talks about eating and drinking the sacrament worthily by discerning the body,' that is, the body as Christ's church (1 Corinthians 11:27, 29; <https://reformedforum.org/pauls-tricky-use-of-body-in-the-lords-supper/>). But I admit that connection with Corpus Christi may be too Anglo-Catholic for some of us. If instead you prefer a more evangelical framework, consider the British devotional writer Oswald Chambers, with his claim that all Christians are called to become 'broken bread and poured out wine for the life of the world.'

That brings us back full circle to where I began our reflections for this Second Sunday after Pentecost: back to Howard Thurman's 'Sound of the Genuine.' Here I invite you to join me today in hearing the sound of the genuine in the way that the gospel challenges us to adopt one another as mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers—as holy family members; in the way that we join together to do the will of God, to be the people of God, and finally to be genuinely Christ-like as 'broken bread and poured out wine' for the life of the world today.

For that calling may you receive this benediction:

Glory to God, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen!  
(Ephesians 3:20-21)

[1] Howard Thurman, "The Sound of the Genuine." Baccalaureate Address at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia on May 4, 1980; edited by Jo Moore Stewart for The Spelman Messenger, Vol. 96, No. 4 [Summer 1980], 14-15. <https://www.uindy.edu/eip/files/reflection4.pdf>

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