

## **Sermon: Anything but Candyland**

Year B, Proper 5

[Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

This sermon is targeted towards the graduates' support crews, including everyone in this congregation who has made baptismal vows to help raise kids in their Christian faith. Even if you weren't there when this particular batch of graduates were baptized, it's sort of a transferable vow — other congregations will take care of the kids we vowed to take care of, we take care of the kids we have. So I'm speaking to the support crew.

Actually, I'm speaking to everyone who has ever played Candyland with a three year old. Turn over a card, go to the next square with that color, go forward or back to the cartoon character. See if you can take the short cuts. It's not a complicated game. You have to be able to recognize colors and that's about it. It's your opponent that makes the game so tough. There are barely any rules to begin with. Then new rules appear. Old ones are reinterpreted into staggering complexity. You begin to wonder if the Department of Motor Vehicles has a secret toddler division that your kid is heading up.

So for every adult who has ever played Candyland, there's a moment when you start the litany. "I can read. I'm allowed to vote, to drive, to serve in the military. I have a mortgage and car payments and I'm responsible for this beloved little human. I can win or lose this game with good sportsmanship." All you see ahead of you is hours more of toddler tyranny and Lord Licorice. Yet there we stay, sitting on the floor, hoping for the Mr. Mint card. Because Candyland is the first step for our beloved little human in learning how to compete and how to win and lose. Even grandparents, who somehow genetically lose their impatience gene that drove them through their parenting years, have been known to walk away from the third round of Candyland. There's only so much self-inflicted suffering a soul can take.

Jesus came to us as a child. He assured us we had to be like children if we wanted to enter heaven. Yet as a support team, as parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, members of the same congregation, we all focus on the children with the same goal. To help them have their outer nature of children waste away. We want them to be more careful, not to trust everyone who offers them a ride in their car or who tells them their beautiful or who says they have a sure fired way to make money. Living in New Hampshire, you see more presidential candidates than just about anyone, so you get good at sizing them up and you want your kids to get good at that too. We want the kids to get good at planning ahead, like learning to close their windows against the pollen. There's all sorts of childish things we want to teach them to stop doing and all sorts of grown up things we want to teach them to start doing. So we dive into the abyss of frustration that is Candyland because that's our job.

Today's passage from 2 Corinthians speaks of our outer nature wasting away, and it certainly refers to more than childhood, but we can see our loss of childhood as being part of what wastes away. But it also speaks of our inner nature being renewed. If the support team, that cloud of grownups who support every kid, helps their outer nature waste away, what are we doing to help renew their inner nature?

Today's reading from Mark is pretty confusing. It starts in the middle of a sentence, basically after Jesus has been teaching the multitudes by the lakeside (not the loaves and the fishes

lakeside or the sermon on the mount lakeside — another lakeside teaching moment). Jesus has just appointed his twelve disciples. They head to the house where today's reading takes place and the crowd follows him. The house and the space around the house are so crammed that no one can eat. In addition to everyone who was at the lakeside, Jesus' family is there as well as a passel of scribes.

It feels like everyone's a little freaked out by the number of people following Jesus and following him so closely. So his family says Jesus is out of his mind and the scribes go one better and say he's possessed by the devil. Jesus takes their logic apart, basically arguing that the Devil wouldn't cast out demons — they're on the same team, they're part of what makes up Beelzebul's own house. Then there's the bit about the strong man, which could mean anything, probably referring to Jesus, but there are a variety of opinions on that. Jesus wraps up the lesson by saying that speaking against the Holy Spirit is a true sin. The bottom line on this lesson is to not get in the way of what Jesus is teaching,<sup>1</sup> whether you dislike him because he threatens your position as a scribe or you're his biological family concerned for his safety.

That's kind of counter-intuitive. The scribes are the ones who are trained to know and explain the sacred texts. If anyone was going to be able to articulate what the will of God was, you would think it would be them. So they wouldn't get in the way of anyone who is encouraging more and more people to obey the will of God. But they're accusing Jesus of being in league with the devil.

His biological family would be expected to have Jesus' best interests at heart, so they'd be most likely to keep him from harm. Yet they are getting in the way of him doing God's will and he's pointing that out and not doing that in private. Indeed, to drive the lesson home, Jesus points out into the mob around him and says that his family are all those who do the will of God.

By the end of today's lesson, the insiders have become outsiders and the outsiders have become insiders.<sup>2</sup> One of the ways those of us on the support team teach our children how to renew their inner nature is to be the kind of insider Jesus is looking for. The Scribes don't see Jesus at all; they view the whole world as a collection of stereotypes. Viewing the world as stereotypes gets them caught in that crazy logic accusing Jesus of being a devil to cast our devils. Jesus expects his followers to let go of the stereotypes and see people as individuals<sup>3</sup>, indeed as beloved individuals. So that's what we've taught our kids. But if we're being completely honest, we know we still use stereotypes to judge people. Sometimes it's our kids that call us on it, being racist or sexist or classist or homophobic or whatever. We're trying, but we've not always succeeding. And some days it seems like we're failing more than succeeding.

But look at the story, really look at it. Jesus is pointing at the mob saying that his family is those who do the will of God. But who in the story is actually doing the will of God? We know it's not the Scribes or Jesus' biological family. The disciples have just been called, but up to now (and frankly for the rest of the Gospel of Mark), they're pretty much going to miss whatever point Jesus makes. The mob? Pretty much the mob is doing what a mob does. It's there to see the show, to ride the wave of emotion and elation and then to go home.

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Edwards, "Markan sandwiches: the significance of interpolations in Markan narratives." *Novum Testamentum* 31, no. 3 (1989): 210.

<sup>2</sup> George Aichele. "Jesus' Uncanny "Family Scene." *Journal For The Study Of The New Testament* no. 74 (1999): 40.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Keller. "Jesus and the critics : a logico-critical analysis of the Marcan confrontation." *Interpretation* 40, no. 1 (1986): 35.

So who's doing the will of God? Jesus makes it sound like there's some sizable group working on the kingdom. But when we look at where he's pointing, it's hard to see, almost a crowd that doesn't appear.<sup>4</sup> It's ambiguous.

As best we can tell, Mark was the first of the gospels to be written down. It's pretty clear that both Matthew and Luke had access to copies of it when they wrote their gospels. Both Matthew and Luke smooth out a lot of the ambiguities when they recount their versions of the stories in Mark. But not Mark. He holds a lot of ambiguity in his Gospel.

In today's story, Jesus points out how the constricted faith of the Scribes leads them into a logical pothole. A faith that can't live with the ambiguities of the world is going to end up shorting out. A narrow faith puts out an argument that the world has to conform with. Sometimes it does. But often times it doesn't. A faith that is a stance from which to step into the world, can embrace all sorts of ambiguities.<sup>5</sup> It can join in with a crowd of people who are doing the will of God, even if that crowd has not yet appear. And by joining it, it can bring the crowd into physical being.

When we sit on the floor, our rumps aching, and search for King Kandy, we are doing so in part because we have taken a stance with our faith. It's important that our kids learn how to win and lose and follow rules. We confront the ambiguities that our opponent presents us with as the rules change and change and change. We may hate the game enough that we fantasize about stacking the deck when the kid's asleep so that the next time they either win or lose, depending on how vengeful we're feeling. But the opportunity that this lesson on dealing with what chance hands you, about staying in loving relationship with your opponent, about what it looks like when someone does something they really don't want to do is an opportunity you have to take. Because you never know where this opportunity will lead.

The kids need to see us playing Candyland with its ambiguous rules. They need to see us ride the waves of the PTO where such small molehills get whipped up into such huge mountains. They need to see us survive the ambiguity at the heart of what exactly a curfew means, or how an emergencies only credit card can be used during the first year at college. We use rules to help them shed their outer nature; but we have to stay focused on the stance we take because of our faith that allows us to thrive in an ambiguous world.

Ambiguous moments come every single day during our lives. We don't want to be the nagging mom, but we do because that's what it takes for them to get through their chores. We don't want to be the Little League coach because the parents are worse than the kids, but we do. We don't want to play Candyland, indeed, we'll play any game but Candyland, and yet there we are in the Lollipop Woods. Because taking on all this ambiguity is the only way we can show the unambiguous truth that we are committed to supporting these children that we love and raise. We have graduates to celebrate today because we have taken our faithful stance to live in a world of ambiguities in order to love them according to the will of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Aichele, 40.

<sup>5</sup> Keller, 36.