

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia  
January 13, 2019  
(originally preached June 14, 2007)

*“One”*

*Mark 3:20-35*  
George C. Anderson

The question I raise year after year remains unanswered. What is it about the Roanoke Valley that attracts snow storms on Saturdays and Sundays? Is it geological? Is there some connection between McAfee’s Knob’s, the Roanoke River and the Peaks of Otter that creates some sort of weather vortex on weekends? Or is it spiritual and demons are out to keep the Gospel from being proclaimed in Roanoke? I don’t want to blame God, not in this sanctuary anyway, but I will tell you that God and I have had many conversations on this topic.

I adopted a strategy some years ago. All three ministers take sermon preparation very seriously. Tired of wrestling all week on a sermon and then presenting my new sermon-child to only 16 people, I developed a “Snow Sermon Policy.” I would shelve the sermon I wrote till another Sunday and preach a sermon at least 10 years old.

It did not occur to me till I showed up this morning to consider a “Baptism of our Lord” sermon which would be in keeping with the liturgical calendar, the liturgy, the bulletin cover, and the hymns. No, I took the “icy side road”- the road less traveled. I chose one from 2007 that Elwyn Murry asked a copy of so he could use it in a talk he later gave. If you don’t like it, write and blame him.

I also realized that the title of the sermon I chose is “One.” Maybe, subconsciously I chose this sermon because I feared that one would be the attendance tally for the day.

And I realized that I chose a passage that is not a “feel-good passage.” Maybe that reflects my grumpy attitude about the abusive relationship weather has with churches in Roanoke.

But it is not a feel-good passage. We like to think of Jesus as a family man who loves his family, but that doesn’t come across with what Jesus says at the end of the reading. Listen to what he says, and listen for the Word of God:



Then he went home; <sup>20</sup>and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. <sup>21</sup>When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” <sup>22</sup>And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” <sup>23</sup>And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “**How can Satan cast out Satan? <sup>24</sup>If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup>And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. <sup>26</sup>And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. <sup>27</sup>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.**

<sup>28</sup>“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; <sup>29</sup>but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—<sup>30</sup>for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

<sup>31</sup>Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. <sup>32</sup>A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” <sup>33</sup>And he replied, “**Who are my mother and my brothers?**” <sup>34</sup>And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “**Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup>Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.**”

“One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever do.”

Put that song on a list that includes “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction,” and “Wild Thang, You Make my Heart Sang.” There’s not much else to the song except the refrain, “**One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever do.**”

But what else is there to say? The thought stands alone. Lonely thought. Lonely singer. “**She went away.**” That’s it. Gone. Alone. One.

“One” is a number with which Jesus often has to come to terms. At his life’s beginning, he is whisked away to Egypt because his infant peers are being put to the sword, and at his life’s end he dies abandoned on the cross. In between-

though Jesus often is with others,

though he often is in and out of homes and synagogues-

we catch glimpses of how lonely he can be *even in a crowd*. Because of who he is and what he is about, he finds himself, from time to time, set apart even from those closest to him.



We needn’t go further than our passage.



It starts with family. It has been said that “Home is where they always have to take you in.” Sadly, that is not true for everyone. But for most, blood runs pretty thick; family support is what we can count on. “My mamma, she loves me. She loves me like a rock.”

And Jesus is told that his mamma- and siblings- are standing outside. The family is outside because they think Jesus is out of his mind and they came to bring him home. And Jesus asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” He answers his own question with a sweeping gesture that takes in those who are gathered around him: “Here are my mother and my brothers.”

Of course, this is not Jesus’ general attitude toward his birth family. Of multiple scriptural examples of Jesus’ love of his family, I’ll remind you of the most poignant one: From the cross, he makes sure that his mother will be cared for after he has died.

Nevertheless, right here, right now, *in this red-hot moment*, the family members who normally are inside Jesus’ circle are outside it. Jesus is alone. And so, Jesus points to those who are inside supporting his work of mercy and forgiveness and says, “This, right now, is my family.”



Another group in our passage to which Jesus at times belongs is the circle of religious authorities. In our passage, they are represented by the scribes. Don’t be confused by the fact that in the Gospel stories Jesus often is in conflict with the authorities. Jesus was no anarchist. He understood the need for government and the rule of Law. He encouraged fellow Jews to pay their taxes and render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and he was an obedient Jew who sent those he healed to priests to be certified as clean. He saw himself as one who came to fulfill, not overthrow, the Jewish Law.

But these scribes also are concerned about what they have heard about Jesus. It is not that they think Jesus is out of his mind, they think something else has gotten into his mind; that he’s possessed by Beelzebul, an evil demon.

And so, *at this red-hot moment*, Jesus is alone when facing the authorities. Jesus defends himself against their charge with parables. If this were a Bible study class and not a sermon, I would explain how the passage has a chiasmic structure of A, B, C, B, A. The notation C, being bracketed in the middle is the core of the passage.<sup>1</sup> What you find in the middle are the parables Jesus tells. He says, “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” In other words, how can someone who casts out demons be demon possessed?

But he means more than that too. Are not the scribes dividing God’s house with their accusation? Jesus goes on to say that they are committing an unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. The unforgivable sin is a variation of the political trick of turning an opponent’s virtue into a vice; it is seeing what is good and calling it evil.



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<sup>1</sup> This is one of the passages that has a chiasmic structure: A, B, C, B, A. Both As have to do with family, the Bs have to do with either the charge of Jesus being possessed and Jesus’ counter charge, and then there is the stand-alone C, which is central. The parables Jesus tells are C.



Finally, there are the disciples and others who are inside the house listening to Jesus. *At this red-hot moment*, they are the inner circle. They are the ones keeping Jesus from being alone. That's what Jesus says, after all, when he sweeps his hand to indicate those who are gathered around him and says, "**Here are my mother and my brothers.**"

And yet, let's remember we're in the Gospel of Mark. These disciples now affirmed by Jesus elsewhere are rebuked by him, and it happens over and over again. Elsewhere, he tells them they are "of little faith," he asks how much longer he has to put up with them, and in one memorable moment he turns on Peter and tells him, "**Get behind me Satan!**"



If you're trying to figure out who's in and who's out with Jesus, you can't go by any group; not family, not authorities, not followers. Here they are in, there they out.

So, *who's in?* If Jesus does not really abandon his family, and is supportive of proper authority, and doesn't give up on his followers, then how would he define his inner circle? Think of Jesus using an imaginary pen to draw a circle.

- It is not a *salvation pen*. Jesus is not deciding who is saved and who are the damned.
- It is not a *blood is thicker than water pen*. Jesus won't take his family's side simply because they are kin.
- It is not a *political pen*. Jesus isn't aligning with or against the Roman government.
- It is not a *friendship pen*. Jesus often is at odds with his followers and friends.
- It is not a *denominational pen*. Pharisees, Scribes and Priests often do not agree, but Jesus at times agrees and is at cross purposes with them all.

So, what kind of pen is it?



A clue can be found in the line, "**Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.**" Whoever is at one with the Father's will and purpose is one with me. The pen Jesus uses is a moral, ethical one.

Which means that if we, as followers of Jesus, use the same pen, we will find ourselves in Jesus' company of "One."

By "One," I mean something paradoxical. "One" stands for the solitary nature of the person who finally answers only to God. To take a moral stand is sometimes to stand alone. That's one side of the paradox of what I mean by "One." It is the *solitary* nature of faithful obedience.



The other side of the paradox is this: “One” also stands for the *communal* nature of being first “at one with” others who are also about God’s work, and second of being “at one with” those who need God’s grace. During *the red-hot moment* of our passage, Jesus is in communion with those in solidarity with his work of justice, mercy and grace; and in communion with those who need God’s healing and grace.

If we are to call ourselves followers of Jesus, then let’s notice how Jesus both *alienates* and *aligns* himself. He does the first by doing the second. He **alienates** himself from authorities and family by **aligning** himself with those with whom the authorities and family would like to stay apart.

- Jesus exposes himself to impurity by healing the sick. He touches lepers, he touches dead bodies, he touches menstruating women (“So what?” you might say to that last one. You’re right, but it was thought to be a big deal then).
- He sullies his reputation by associating with the wrong company of sinners, not just addressing their sins but actually befriending them,
  - eating with them,
  - affirming their place at table,
    - in the community
    - and even in his company of followers; sinners
      - like that tax collector he made a disciple,
      - the woman caught in adultery he kept from being stoned,
      - the woman whose reputation was soiled with scandal and whom Jesus blesses after she washes his feet with her tears...

By “standing with” those who others “stand against,” Jesus isolates himself from those who don’t want to be *with him... when he is with them*.



Remember that often those who find themselves on the outs with Jesus often are good people; family, friends and followers; people with respectable titles- the kind of people you want to like you, to please, to make proud. Jesus doesn’t close off communion with any of them, but in *the red-hot moments* he is willing to stand in isolation apart from them. To be at one with God’s will and at one with those who are about God’s work or who need God’s grace is to sometimes to be in the company of “One.” Every Christian should come to terms with the reality that *in red-hot moments*, she or he may be alone.

In fact, I pray that will be the case for the children of this church. Children and youth are under enormous pressure to align themselves with certain groups. I pray that every child and young person will know what it is like to be derided because she or he stands against the crowd on behalf of a good or in solidarity with the ostracized. I pray for that pain, because I think it is a redemptive pain that is necessary for a Christian character to develop.



Of course, that means I pray the same for the rest of us as well. In praying for it, I know how much I don't like being in those *red-hot moments*. Social pressures; peers, ideologies, and agendas; they all can be almost demonic in their power. They want to make us their insiders, so that we become their ways and means of achieving their ends. But when either mercy or justice requires us to stand against those powers, some of whom have the faces and voices of friends, families and those who assume we can be counted upon to be on their side, then the pain of being in the *Company of One* is to be embraced and not avoided.



I'll close with a story that made the news when I first preached this sermon but is still the best illustration of what it might look like to embrace being "One."

Will Campbell was a Baptist preacher whose first time leading worship had him reading a Bible donated to the church by the Ku Klux Klan. He evolved into a Civil Rights leader; the only white minister present at the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he escorted black students into Central High School in Little Rock, he met with Martin Luther King Jr., he participated in Civil Rights demonstrations. As to his church, family and friends of origin, he knew what it meant to be in the company of "One," but in taking a stand for Civil Rights, he became at one with the Civil Rights community.

Good illustration of what I am talking about?

Only there is more. In 2006, Campbell, a leader of Civil Rights (and because he was early in the cause—all the more heroic), received withering criticism and condemnation from the Civil Rights community because, without changing his views about racial justice, he reached out to members of the Ku Klux Klan in his Nashville community offering ministry and friendship. Campbell's response to the critical firestorm that came at him from those who once claimed him as their hero was this: "[Southern Klan members are in no less need of God's grace than Southern blacks.](#)" He was so stubborn in identifying with those who need to know the grace of God, including obvious sinners, he never finally fit in with anyone.

Should we?

