June 10, Ordinary 10B (Mark 3:20-35)

When Jesus names the need for deep social change, people think he's possessed.

by Jeanne Choy Tate in the May 23, 2018 issue

This scene in Mark is set with two separate groups of characters standing on opposite sides of a door: insiders and outsiders. Outside, along with the scribes from Jerusalem, stands Jesus' family. The inside is where Jesus has just retired for a meal with his newly appointed disciples. The disciples we would expect but not, perhaps, the riffraff who are also there, crowding around Jesus so much that he cannot eat.

Jesus' family has heard that he is behaving as if he were possessed, and they have come to intervene. Indeed, the scribes are claiming that Jesus casts out demons by the power of that greatest demon of all, Satan. Either uninvited or unwilling to enter, his family summons their son and brother to come out to them.

Jesus responds with a sweeping gesture that takes in all those inside seated around him: "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Shouldn't it be the other way around? Shouldn't those who represent the two major protectors of social order—the family and the synagogue—be the insiders? With his simple gesture and words, Jesus turns this upside down.

Surely anyone who has parented teenagers or can recall their own teenage years can relate to the family's feeling that their grown child is suddenly so possessed of outlandish ideas and behavior that he or she seems to have gone crazy. The ideas of the next generation so often seem to challenge the carefully constructed world the last one has created for itself. Yet how tightly we cling to that order! In an honor/shame culture, a child's behavior—even when grown—is of great consequence. The social standing of Jesus' family is jeopardized by his behavior. The whole family is shamed.

Jesus is going for deep change. His exorcisms are not only for individuals but for the social institutions that helped create the diseases he is healing. The social order that the Hebrew people had known for centuries was in fact already crumbling. As the land peasant families had farmed for generations was consolidated into large estates, there was an exodus to the cities. Younger sons, in particular, were forced to leave behind the land of their ancestors for crowded and impoverished urban life. With the traditional clan network disappearing, Jesus was only pointing out the obvious: the people were indeed becoming a “house divided against itself.”

Today, the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements have shaken various social institutions with their revelations of sexual abuse and gender inequity. These movements are seeking to exorcise not just sexual abuse but a whole system of gender privilege rife throughout the structure of our society. They seek deep, systemic change, just as Jesus did in his day.

The church is not immune from its own #ChurchToo revelations. Yet in the midst of this call for change, much of the church has remained largely silent. Never comfortable talking about sexual matters, and fearful that truth telling might jeopardize membership and funding, churches are prone to deny sexual misconduct or to minimize it with platitudes about forgiveness.

I spent more than 50 years in San Francisco’s Chinese American community at Cameron House, a youth and social service agency and formerly a national mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Over a 30-year tenure, the pastor there sexually abused three generations of Chinese American boys. Forty survivors came forward; some estimate that the actual number is in the hundreds. My husband was one of them, as a 13-year-old, along with too many of my friends.

Years after this pastor retired, Cameron House and its partner congregation, the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown, recognized that the abuse had not just impacted individuals but had sent out ripple effects on spouses and children, families and marriages, indeed the whole congregation. Like the Hebrews, this Chinese American Christian community was divided against itself and in need of healing—and deep, systemic change.

The Cameron House board formed a healing committee, which I was privileged to sit on. At one of our first meetings, the committee realized that, if it were to undertake this healing work, Cameron House would claim a new identity: wounded healers.

Many thought the agency was crazy to undertake a process of truth telling and healing. Cameron House would lose funds and members. It would lose its cherished traditions. Yet Cameron House intentionally moved forward to name its wounds and change its culture. In that process, Cameron House became a force for healing and a model for deep change.

Just as it takes courage for victims of clergy sexual abuse to come forward, so too it requires courage for the church to confess its institutional sins and acknowledge the wounds and scars it bears upon its body. Many will call the church crazy, even possessed. As the body of Christ in the world, the church needs to be possessed by a new way of understanding ministry.

In *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen writes that a Christian community is “a healing community not because wounds and pains are alleviated but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision. . . . The wound which causes us to suffer now, will be revealed to us later as the place where God intimated his new creation.” Wounds, when acknowledged, can provide a source for healing. A broken body can lead to new life. The church is called to follow Jesus in saying, “This is my body broken for you.” For by his wounds we are healed—and by our own wounds as well.