

Epiphany 4

Mark 1:21-28

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Year B

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Jesus began his public ministry with a splash! He was a hit in Capernaum! Mark's gospel is framed with the excitement of Jesus' disciples and others who are astonished and amazed at his teaching and healing on this, the inaugural day in Jesus' public life. He and the disciples have gone to Capernaum where, on the Sabbath, Jesus is the guest preacher in the synagogue. And he wows them! "Did you hear what he said? A new teaching –not that same of stuff we usually hear from the scribes. This guy teaches with authority!" They really like Jesus. But then there's a spoiler – the man in the back pew who tries to upset everything. "**What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?**" Which is a way of saying: "Go away! We don't want you here! Leave us alone!" Now, granted ever congregation has its share of sermon critics, but this is a loud, obtrusive voice of an unclean spirit – a disordered life, one who is not whole. This spirit knows Jesus as his adversary. He is defensive and he distances himself from Jesus by asking, "**What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?**"

And Jesus has come to destroy. Not only is he one who interprets the Word of God with great power and authority, Jesus is also one whose **spoken word** drives out unclean spirits. His authority to heal is the authority to bring evil to an end. This is how Jesus defines his ministry. The Holy One of God is on his earthly pilgrimage to proclaim the kingdom of God and to confront whatever opposes it by healing the brokenness of the world. And we, his disciples, are called to answer his invitation to "follow me." Like those disciples he called last week Simon and Andrew, James and John - he calls us also, to drop our nets, or whatever we are doing, and pay attention to him. And he certainly gets our attention this morning. As do the 2 questions of the demoniac:

What have you to do with us, Jesus? Have you come to destroy us?

Do we fear he will rebuke us? Change our lives in a way that we aren't ready for, or don't want? Does God expect us to perform some daring act? Preaching and confronting disordered lives surely carry expectations we're not be able to meet. It's probably not really what most of us have in mind. Isn't it enough to be kind and thoughtful to others, make a pledge to

the church, and try to get here most Sundays? The answer is yes, it is enough when we are doing those things out of love. God is pleased with all our actions and offerings - large or small -when they come out of hearts of love. But the answer might also be that God is asking for a change in our hearts – a conversion – a transformation. **“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Are you here to destroy, or upset our lives?**

I know that our life as this community of faith at Epiphany is a life of the gospel. We reach out to others, despite the media’s message to take care of number one and find meaning in life through material values. Our priorities continue to be our outreach to the downtown poor and workers.

Our Hospitality is committed to keeping our doors open throughout the week for anyone who needs a place for quiet and rest. We do this in a city where gated-communities and the secured lobbies of office buildings are designed to keep some folks out.

But all of us know that the voices that oppose the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims can be loud and insistent. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the negatives of life. And like the man possessed of the unclean spirit, we too can be silenced by the enormity of it all. Images of war, threats of terrorism, famine on the African continent, the magnitude and frustrations of rebuilding New Orleans, ...the list can go on and on, including issues here on our doorstep. Last Wednesday evening we heard the story of the Anacostia River and how it has become a dumping ground for overflow of sewage and garbage not just Washington, but also Maryland.

So, what does Jesus and his ministry have to do with us? First of all, we need to know we don’t do it by our own power. Jesus empowers each of us with the gifts needed to be disciples. He empowers us to have confidence in him and to see ourselves as conduits for his love and authority. We don’t have to do it all ourselves. Secondly, we are able to follow Jesus when we remember that this is God’s world, and God is still our creator and the one who has the ultimate power and control. We forget this because in his love, God never coerces us to do something against our free will. He has given us the freedom to response or avoid opportunities that he offers us. And many times we want to choose the familiar reality that keeps us from having to take risks. We tend to like our cozy world just as it is. We don’t want to know a disturbing truth that might raise our consciousness about an issue, and might cause us to struggle with the possibility of walking an unexplored path in life, or even seeing the familiar with new eyes.

But, God calls us to wake up! To recognize that sometimes our lives of safety and comfort might be holding us back from following Jesus. “Drop those nets of affluence that act as a buffer between you and others. Drop your nets of intellect and efficiency.” As Paul says, knowledge can puff us up, inflate our sense of self. It can keep us separate from others. But love builds up. Love nurtures and empowers us. Love is the foundation of Jesus’ ministry, and our own. Jesus loved that man possessed with an unclean spirit – he loved him despite his disordered life. Yes, Jesus was an insightful and powerful teacher, and it was his authority founded on his love for the world that drew him to the man when others might have backed off. Jesus did not draw back. We can all wake up to those things that hold us back – habits of life that are disconnecting us from God and from one another. In your own lives, notice when there is a yearning, a longing to connect.

So often we hear how different we are from each other. Differences that stem from the money we make, our politics, where we live, the cars we drive or don’t drive, how we view religion. But in one respect we really are not so different. We all share a common trait of seeking connections. We long to know one another, and we long to be known. That is a reason we come here to church – it is a place to make connections. And when we do, we learn about each other, and we learn about God’s love for us. It’s really a holy longing (R. Rolheiser) that we have. It is the kernel of what Jesus has to do with us. Jesus has come to say to us, “You are not alone. I have come to set you free from loneliness and feelings of alienation. There is a goodness and love that God offers us each day we wake up. And on those days when we aren’t in touch with it, we can ask God to reveal his love to us. Because when we do know and feel that love in our hearts, we are changed. Love does that to us. We are transformed. And we will be more likely to share it with others.

A word that sums up what Jesus has to do with us is the word is **compassion**. This word that’s more than having *sympathy* for another person. There is also the meaning “to suffer with” –com-passion. To lose our indifference, our apathy. Jon Sorbino calls compassion “waking up from the sleep of inhumanity” and being aware to the point of having a change of heart. As we practice small acts of compassion we will develop be given a deeper capacity for the love that empowers us to live lives that follow after Jesus.

Henri Nouwen describes this compassion as a mystery in which our hearts are being connected to the heart of the God who suffers with us. He wrote:

“Do not hesitate to love and to love deeply...the more you have loved and have allowed yourself to suffer because of your love, the more you will be able to let your heart grow wider and deeper.”¹

This is the life of a disciple: to become open and vulnerable to the suffering of others as the way to know one another, and to know the heart of God. May each of us be empowered to follow Jesus as he calls us to join him in ministry, and not be afraid to love as he loves us. Amen.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom*, 1996, 59.