

January 28, 2024 Epiphany: The Rev Beth Orling

Epiphany 4B. January 28, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Psalm 111, I Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28. “Notes for a young scribe”.

The Gospel

Mark 1: 21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ ²⁶And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The sermon

Imagine a young scribe, a note-taker and keeper of the ancient laws of Moses. We’ll call him Amos. He stands at the fringe of the gathering in the synagogue. He’s craning his neck, trying to hear every word the man from Nazareth is saying. Repent. Believe that the Kingdom of God is among you.

Then the crazy man of Capernaum shows up. It was the Sabbath -- no one would break Sabbath laws to physically restrain him or to offer help. During the week they would throw him out, but not on the Sabbath.

He goes right up to the teacher from Nazareth, making his usual racket. He sputters out words like “holy one” and “destroy”. He even calls the teacher by name. There was power in the disrupter that day – because if you can name someone or something, you have a power advantage.

The teacher didn’t miss a beat.

“Be silent!”

he commanded the power *in* that troubled man.

“Be healed!”

was his message *to* the troubled man.

And the poor man fell to the floor. It was terrible. He thrashed around and screamed all the louder. Amos would never forget it. But the man finally came to rest. Peace and wonder filled the room. Jesus went on with his teaching. Repent. Believe the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Maybe, thought Amos, this man from Nazareth – of all places – was like the prophets of old, like Moses. This man cut right to the chase – he didn't *discuss* the illness that had taken over the troubled man's life. He didn't *agonize* over Sabbath laws like we do. He simply commanded the illness to leave, and it did.

That is a holy authority that wills good for us. How many long years had that poor man plagued us with his outbursts! How impossible it was for him to work, to live among his family, to have a friend! *We* had no power, no authority over the illness that tormented him.

This Jesus of Nazareth is different. He speaks with authority. That means you can believe him. The prophetic voice is not silent.

Perhaps that voice was here all along, but we didn't hear it? Perhaps we have forgotten the mighty acts of God that old king David recounted in the psalms we pray. Perhaps we have not believed that God is still with us. Can we learn to speak with authority, the authority of justice and wisdom that God gives?

Can we recognize our own sins, the sins of our community, our society? Can we believe that God's reign is possible here – even when we want to despair of good in our world. Even when we have troubled people everywhere.

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God seeks again and again to reach us as a holy authority outside ourselves that wills us good. The authority of Jesus' healing words is here among us. Do we hear them? Can we believe them? Will we love one another? Or will we judge and argue with one another?

I wish Jesus were here to talk with us about dilemmas and hard decisions in our lives. I wish Jesus were here on Monday to talk with our guests about the things that trouble them. I worry about the men who camp out here in the parking lot. We who have warm homes, food, hot water, electricity ask ourselves, "How do we best care for them?"

How do we demand justice and mercy from our government? How do we find enough social workers and low-income housing?

How do we reach children who need to hear about Jesus, or elders who need a gentle presence?

We who have an address can be tempted to overlook people without one. We who have heat, air conditioning, cars, plane travel, plentiful food can be tempted to overlook the climate change that will make wet places wetter, dry places drier, erode farmland and coastal land in the poorest places of the world. We who know everyone's name at

coffee hour can be tempted to forget the experience we once had when we knew no one's name and were perhaps too shy to mix in.

People just like us have heard the voice of God and have ignored, or stifled, or crucified it. People just like us have heard the voice of God and believed and shared it with one another.

What happened for Amos and the sick man and those listening to Jesus in the Capernaum synagogue can happen for you and me today as well. Jesus looked at the sick man and healed him. He looked around at Amos and the other scribes as if to say, do you see it? Do you see the power of my authority? And, as he often did in other stories of healing, Jesus spoke the words Amos, the man-made-whole, the other scribes, and you and I need to hear. Be aware of what is wrong. Believe that I forgive you. And believe that God forgives you and that I offer a healthy way of life for you.

Now, says our Lord, I invite you: get up, go about your business, live your vocation and do not forget the justice I desire. Remember the woman, the man, the child falling through the cracks. Notice and welcome the man outside your circle. Think of the poorest people of the world who will suffer most from climate change. Seek to understand the person who is different from you, who struggles with demons you cannot even imagine, who needs the encouraging word, the acceptance that YOU can give!

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The early church in Corinth gives us an example of a congregational issue that posed a dilemma. The Corinthian priests of temples dedicated to a particular god would burn meat as an offering to that god. Then they would eat or sell the leftover roasted barbecue. It was first century "fast food" and a way for the priests to make money.

Some Christians came to realize the "fast food" meat tasted pretty good. And even though they didn't worship the god on whose altar it had been roasted, they bought and consumed it. Other Christians said, "You shouldn't have anything to DO with that stuff. Keep yourself pure!"

So what's Pastor Paul to do when there are two such conflicting opinions in the congregation – both arguably valid? He teaches with the authority of love: there's nothing wrong with eating that meat – in and of itself. But since there still were some who were deeply offended by it, Paul offers to stop eating *any* meat for a while if that will help those who do not yet understand his teaching.

Each of us is faced every day with the dilemma of doing the right thing. Economics may battle with compassion. Survival may battle with generosity. We don't struggle with meat offered to idols but here's the principle: If what's good for you will harm someone else, don't do it. Do we tow away the cars our guests live in or try to make our parking lot a safe camping spot??? Or is there a better way? I don't know. I struggle.

Together we experience community in Christ – but we have varying opinions. Love does not avoid conflict. Paul kept teaching – with the Christ-like authority of love – about the idol-roasted meat; he kept addressing moral issues of his day, as does the Episcopal church of our day. And he asks that every member of the community be taken seriously – weak or strong, with or without authority or wisdom – for each is an individual loved by God and cherished by Jesus.

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Christ Jesus never stopped loving. His true and greatest authority was shown when he prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them” and when he promised the dying thief “paradise” “today.” Alive for us now, he graces our worship, our conversations, our deliberations -- with his own healing words. He empowers us by the Holy Spirit to heal one another. Jesus looks you and me in the eye and says, “I know the demons you struggle with. The kingdom of God is here. Eat this bread! It’s me in you and for you. Remember the words I said so often while I walked the earth, I love you. Be well!”
Amen.