

The 4th Sunday after Epiphany

The Gospel reading: Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and 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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They 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.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. The Gospel of the Lord

The February 2012 issue of *The Lutheran* magazine arrived at our house on Friday and yesterday I picked it up to read while I was eating breakfast. I always begin at the beginning which in this issue was an article by Peter Marty. He focused on the unconditional love exhibited by the father in the story of the prodigal son. (I'll return to his article later.) I skimmed through the list of articles and looked over what happened in the world. Then I turned to the back and read Bishop Mark Hanson's article, his subtitle is "Time for repentance, return to life & roots." Later in this sermon I will talk about the connection between the way we live our lives and roots. But the article that really caught my attention was "My view." Jennifer Ohman-Rodriguez writes:

Hi! We're here. We've come to worship. We're new... or maybe we just haven't been here for a while. We look a little reserved. That's because we're a bit cautious, maybe even scared. You see we are looking for something—a home. This home is currently your home, or at least it feels like your home. We aren't sure we belong here. We're not

even sure we are wanted here. But ...this is the thing. If you notice us, we may light up....your notice awakens us. It brings us to life and into existence in this home. If you pretend to not notice us.....then we are faceless....Notice us, the strangers in your midst. ...Welcome us as fellow children of God who are holy in God's eyes and therefore holy in yours....Be bold, courageous and welcoming, and by doing so give us face, voice and home. Jesus noticed all sorts of people, especially people who were culturally invisible. Jesus noticed people who were begging, collecting taxes, of different ethnic or religious groups, or suffering from disease or mental illness. Jesus noticed these people and in doing so reminded them of life itself—theirs and of their eternally existent home with God....Let your noticing gather us in and welcome us home.(49)

What might today's lessons have to say about our responsibilities when it comes to welcoming others into our church?

During the season of Epiphany the appointed lessons focus on the authority of God as demonstrated through God's commands, God's purposes, and God's promises. Our lessons for this Sunday begins in Deuteronomy 18:15-20 with a promise. Here we learn that God has promised to authorize a series of prophets, like Moses, however, if we ignore them, and what they have to say, we will be held accountable. The majority of the text focuses on those prophets who speak presumptuously. We are not to listen to those prophets. Even those prophets who may be tempted to soften their words may be considered to be a false prophet. On the other hand those who prophesize truly will speak words that carry the authority of God.

Speaking on behalf of God is not a task to be taken lightly. In Psalm 111 we begin by praising God for all that God has done for us, for all God's wonderful works. Just a side note this psalm is interesting because after the initial "Praise the Lord!" or in some translations

“Hallelujah” each of the next half lines begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet making this psalm an acrostic poem. In addition to celebrating God’s wonderful work the Psalm celebrates the covenant that God made with Israel. The Psalm concludes with verse 10 thought to be part of the Wisdom literature (recorded also in Proverbs and Job). “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.” To know God is to fear God, or what I think might be a more accurate interpretation, to know God is to stand in awe of God. Verse 9 says “Holy and awesome is God’s name.” If we consider all of God’s wonderful works we realize that our God is an awesome God. God is above and beyond our understanding. We can only begin to know God, by looking at God’s actions. What has God done? What promises has God made? What is God’s purpose for me? I believe it is only when we glimpse God’s actions throughout history and in the world that we can acknowledge God’s awe-fullness and then begin, in our limited finite human self to understand what our relationship to God should be.

Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians may help us to understand what that relationship should be. It was very important to the people of Corinth whether or not they should be able to eat the meat that was first offered to idols, and in some cases whether it would be acceptable to consume that meat in the temple itself. We can know that there are no idols and therefore it is irrelevant what the meat was initially used for. But this is knowledge that ‘puffs’ us up. Makes us feel smarter than others. The concern has to be for those who at one time did believe in idols and may have even participated in those rituals, but who now have become Christians. How easy it might be for them to return to their old ways if they are re-exposed to them. Wouldn’t it be better for no one to eat meat so that temptation might be avoided?

If we look at the history of the church we realize that often the church has tried to set up

rules that govern behavior. During the Reformation one group removed everything from the church including accompanying instruments and limited the hymns to be used to only those that were biblical in an attempt to better focus the minds of the faithful only on God. During the Pietistic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries church members were not permitted to drink, or dance, or play cards. But is introducing moral rules the best way to keep the ‘weak’ from temptation.

Rather than focusing on the individual it might be helpful to focus on community. What should our community look like? Do we want to be the type of community that excludes people, setting up rules stipulating who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out.’ Or do we want to be the type of community that includes people?

Walter Brueggeman reminds us in his commentary on the Psalms that Yahweh is a gracious, merciful, and righteous God who is faithful. Faithfulness is only acted out within a relationship. God established a relationship with Israel through the old covenant and with us as Christians through the new covenant established through his son, Jesus Christ. Now we can look at Paul’s other message. It is here, within this relationship that love trumps the kind of knowledge that ‘puffs’ us up. It is love that builds us up and keeps us functioning within the community. And it is through love that we were first known by God. Just as the love of the father in the story of the Prodigal son is unconditional so is God’s love. Having been known by God we are free to love God and to love others. This doesn’t, however, make us the moral police of the world. As Paul tells us later in 1 Corinthians 13:5 “Love does not insist on its own way.” Our priority should be the health of the Christian community, and how we can create a welcoming environment for all individuals. Which brings me back to the point that I think Jennifer Ohlman-Rodrigues was making. It is up to each one of us to welcome the strangers that come

into our midst. We must take care that our knowledge doesn't make us arrogant. We also need to remember that our actions outside of church on Sunday morning are as important when encountering the stranger as our actions inside the church. We may find it challenging to survive out in the world if we try to wrap our individuality with knowledge. We may, however, survive if we wrap the community that we inhabit with love.

Which finally brings me back to roots. I read once that the giant Redwoods of the Sequoia National Forest actually have fairly shallow roots? When the question was asked of the Forest Ranger as to why more of them haven't fallen over from the strong winds that occasionally blow through the forest, the response was given that they don't fall over even in the strongest wind because they grow close enough to each other that their branches hold each other up. They live in community. An isolated tree may be blown over but as long as they grow together they will continue to stand tall. What does that mean for us? No matter how deeply our individual roots are planted we may not be able to stand up to life's forces. But if we are living in community, reaching out our arms in love to others, whether our roots are deep or newly planted, we will be able to survive and may even flourish.

May you come then to the altar as part of this community and may you be nourished and strengthened with the body and blood of Jesus the Christ, who astounded his listeners as he taught in the synagogue and demonstrated the authority that God had given to him by commanding the unclean spirit to both leave the man and to be silent. AMEN