

The Unlikely Voice

Mark 1.21-28

Reverend Robert Griffin, Sunshine Cathedral

February 1, 2009

In our gospel reading today, we can be reminded that the Gospel of Mark is commonly accepted as the first to be written of the Gospels, some 40 years following the execution of Jesus. Of the gospels, Mark's is by far the one that best reveals the human side of Jesus. Mark's Jesus spends most of his time performing incredible acts of mercy and is depicted as one seeking to develop relationships.

We must also remember that the motivation of the gospel writers is not to "preserve the facts about Jesus' life on earth but to meet the many different needs of the people in the newly formed first-century Christian community."

Our modern churches today, like the spiritual communities of Jesus' day, are also made up of people with a great variety of spiritual needs. Our affirmation: "Here at the Sunshine Cathedral, we are students and seekers of truth..." speaks to our openness to truth from wherever it may come and our willingness to evolve, change, and grow. We change, our needs change, and as we evolve and move forward, we find new truths to minister to where we are at any given time.

Mark, and the other New Testaments writers, are not only seeking truth, they are daring to speak truth to power. They are learning that they can be nourished by the spirit of truth no matter what is happening to them or around them. Come what may, they can be sustained by their truth that they have discovered themselves to be children of God.

It seems that Mark and his community belonged to that part of the early Christian community which believed that Jesus was going to return very soon. In order to be on guard and ready, Mark urged the people of his day, his audience, to learn from his Jesus, the meaning of radical, here and now discipleship, as if there were no tomorrow.

Mark is saying, we have one life, and we have no idea how long it will last...what are we going to do with today? He is challenging his community to not sit around star-gazing waiting for the return of Jesus. He's encouraging them to be active disciples, seekers of truth, bearers of hope, to be not just hearers of the word, but also doers.

So, our story picks up today after Jesus has passed along the Sea of Galilee, where he has called Simon, Andrew, James and John to leave their jobs and to come follow him. Jesus and his small band of followers had traveled from the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum. In antiquity, Capernaum was an important city located on the NW shore of the Sea of Galilee. After Jesus left Nazareth, Capernaum became the primary location of his ministry in Galilee.¹

After arriving in Capernaum, the Sabbath arrives and Jesus goes to the synagogue. It does not say that his newly called followers went with him. It just says he entered the synagogue and taught. Presumably, he taught those that had come to worship. Neither Mark, nor the readers of Mark know exactly what Jesus taught, but what Mark does reveal to us is that Jesus taught with authority. Jesus did not speak like one of the scribes who were originally the people that copied the scriptures and whose authority was based on their ability to recite the opinion of many Rabbis on a given topic; this was not Jesus' approach.

Jesus did not need someone to interpret the Scripture for him, he spoke as one who had the right to say what scripture meant to him - and that carried with it what the hearers of Jesus described as "a new teaching with authority."

¹ <http://www.olivebranch.com/isreal/galilee.htm>

Jesus taught with such authority that it left people astounded and amazed. Mark's recording of Jesus' first teaching is so powerful that Mark uses the words "astounding" and "amazed" more than once in this short passage to capture and emphasize what people must have felt at Jesus' first teaching moment. Mark wanted them to remember the passion with which Jesus, for himself, interpreted the scriptures. He also wants to empower his readers to be able to do the very same thing.

As often is the case, once a new thing happens, such as Jesus speaking with authority, someone cries out! Someone attending the service, right there in the synagogue, an unlikely person and unlikely voice; someone who just appeared out of nowhere, someone who must have been hearing Jesus' teaching, just cried out. When we hear something new, even if it is empowering, we sometimes react by resisting, by crying out. Empowerment scares us, change scares us, and we are tempted to resist and sometimes resist loudly. But this temptation can be an "unclean spirit," that is, an unhealthy attitude.

Mark doesn't tell us who this person is with the unhealthy attitude, the unclean spirit is; what he does tell us is that he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" This not your typical sermon affirmation like Amen, Preach It, Say That, That's Right, YES...no this was a different response to the challenging message Jesus has just given.

Now, what is worth pointing out is that Jesus never worried about becoming unclean or sick by fraternizing with or touching the spiritually or physically or morally unclean. To associate with the unclean would have meant Jesus would be called unclean, but he didn't seem to care. Jesus even seems to have gone out of his way in some cases to minister to the so-called unclean, to those unhappy souls who habitually cry out. He offended those who saw themselves as the keepers of religious holiness, but he offered hope and healing to those who were tormented by physical ailments and psychological demons.

The question a text like Mark 1 raises for us is: Are we more concerned with public opinion than we are with reaching out, including, and empowering society's outcasts? The answer to this question in Jesus' case seems obvious from the very beginning in Mark. Jesus did not particularly care who he scandalized if he believed he was doing God's work and helping to bring in God's dominion. He was more concerned with personal wholeness than with public perception; he was more concerned with who got the cure than with who got the credit.

One might think that Jesus is the hero of this story, and you know what, he very well could be. And what I do give Jesus credit for here is that he spoke with authority and there was a response. However, the response didn't come from those you would consider to be likely suspects; it didn't come from one of the teachers, one of his newly called followers, one of the scribes. The response came from an unlikely source, and that unlikely source becomes the hero. The person, who is willing to hear Jesus' challenge, and even after responding with fear at first, finally allows the inner healing to take place. Someone was different, wounded, hurt cries out, but also listens and also is changed. Someone with an unclean spirit listens to Jesus, approaches Jesus, cries out but also pours out his heart and in so doing his heart is made clean. His attitude changes. He is renewed. He is healed. He is set free. In Jesus' presence, the unclean is worthy and because he is worthy he is made clean.

Mark 1 challenges us today to ask, do we have any such people in our congregations who show up for worship on Sunday mornings and think that there are people who ought not to be there? Are there members who stifle any attempts at bringing the church into a new century? Do we welcome children, autistic persons, single parents, and people with AIDS? The person who has been arrested for prostitution, the ex-convict, the married person who has come to realize she is really a lesbian, or he is gay? The young, the elderly, the transgender person, the interfaith couple – are they welcome? Should these people be HERE? Mark's story suggests the answer is YES! In the presence of Christ ALL are welcome, all are worthy, and all have sacred value!

The unlikely voices of our passage reading this morning represents those who are and have been on the margins of society crying out, Jesus what have you to do with us? Jesus' answer is, "I have love to share with you,

healing to offer you, hope to give you, acceptance for you, acknowledgment of your sacred value...that's what I have to do with you!"

Those who need a hand up cry out: Jesus, what have you to do with us?

Those who are not paid a decent wage cry out: Jesus, what have you to do with us?

Those who are struggling to accept their sexual orientation cry out: Jesus, what have you to do with us?

Those who know the pain of discrimination cry out: Jesus, what have you to do with us?

There are the unlikely voices among us this morning, one might be sitting right next to you, crying within, Jesus, what have you to do with me?

And when Jesus said, "be silent and come out of him!" Jesus was offering this person hope. Saying do not let whatever you are going through dictate what your future will be, you are not your past problems, nor your current circumstance. Let the fears and regrets come out of you so that you can come into a place of hope and healing.

We are encouraged today to believe that there is meaning behind the visible world. Call that meaning God, or Love, or the Process of Life, but there is more than our difficulties, more than our disappointments, more than our pain. We can seek the truth of life's meaning for ourselves and come to believe that Jesus has a place for us in the community of hope and empowerment. Together, we can be the unlikely voices calling out for justice, compassion, and reconciliation, and we can discover that we are the heroic souls that experience the healing touch of God's unconditional love. Amen.

Affirmation

I give thanks to my God with my whole heart.

I give thanks for life.

I give thanks for my voice.

I give thanks for my ability to communicate.

My voice blesses others.

I will speak my truth to power.

And so it is.

Amen.