

Preaching and Teaching

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 28, 2018

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

At our annual meeting and 60th anniversary kick off on Friday night, we heard stories from Mike Owen and former rector Charlie Roper about the early days of St. Thomas.

The group that started St. Thomas in 1958 did a very good job. Within just a few months, they organized as a parish, called a rector, purchased property, built what is now the outreach center, and started a preschool. And within those first few years, they set a pattern that shapes much of who St. Thomas is today.

For example, from the beginning, St. Thomas had a strong commitment to mission and service.

From the beginning, St. Thomas valued music and sought to offer music well.

From the beginning, St. Thomas valued ministry with children and youth.

From the beginning, St. Thomas cared about being involved in the community.

Now, I'm sure that early congregation did other things as well. I'm sure they had a lot of meetings and hosted fellowship gatherings. I'm sure they cared for those who were sick. But the stories that stand out when people talk about the early years of St. Thomas are stories of outreach and music and children and witness.

Today's gospel lesson from Mark is the first public act of Jesus in Mark's gospel. We think Mark's gospel is the oldest gospel, the earliest written account of the life of and ministry of Jesus in the scriptures. If true, that makes today's gospel lesson the first story told about the ministry of Jesus. Like the stories of St. Thomas, it set a pattern for the future. In this inaugural act of ministry, Jesus taught with authority. And in response an unclean spirit spoke up, and Jesus cast it out.

These stories of exorcisms in the gospels are a puzzle for us today. They seem to come from another time and place and worldview. So we often try to explain them from our own time and place. Maybe this man had epilepsy or a personality disorder. We chalk it up to mental illness or brain injury and assume we would treat what he had with therapy or medication. Since those weren't options then, thank goodness Jesus was there.

Sad to say, but our eagerness to diagnose the people from whom Jesus cast out evil spirits may only add to the stigma of mental illness. People who struggle with mental illness are not evil. They are not possessed by demons. They are often dealing with something that likely will not be

cured by prayer alone so we need to advocate for the best possible mental health options available.

So let's move beyond trying to diagnose the man's medical condition and look at what was happening here spiritually. The gospel says this man was in the grip of an unclean spirit. We don't exactly know what he was facing, but we know the evil spirits of our day. There are still evil forces and powers at work in our world that sometimes feel stronger than we are. We don't know what to do about them. We seem powerless in the face of them. On the big level we think of things like racism and greed and inequality. And on the personal level, we think of things like addiction and resentment and destructive habits that are so hard to change. Like this poor man, we are sometimes possessed by forces outside our control.

When Jesus entered the synagogue and taught with authority, the unclean spirit got defensive. It was ready for a fight. "What have you to do with us?" But Jesus rebuked it, saying "Be silent, and come out of him."

During these weeks after the Epiphany we are thinking about our patterns for worship, why we do what we do and how these patterns shape us. We've talked about baptism, about our prayers and gestures, and about how the whole service is the offering of our lives. Today we are thinking about teaching and preaching, which is what Jesus did in the synagogue that day.

One of the things that often surprises newcomers and visitors to the Episcopal Church is how much scripture we read together in worship. We read three lessons and a psalm almost every Sunday. And it is important to know why we read these particular lessons each week. They come from the Revised Common Lectionary. The lectionary organizes large portions of the Bible into a three year cycle. This cycle is shared by many Christian groups throughout the world. With just a few exceptions, on any given Sunday we are reading the same scriptures Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Anglicans, Lutherans, and many Christians across the globe are reading.

Jesus may have been reading from a similar lectionary that day. The practice actually comes from Judaism. If you've visited with our friends at Temple Israel, you've noticed that they read a Torah portion each week in sequence. Jewish people were doing something similar in the time of Jesus, so early Christians adopted the practice. For much of Christian history, the cycle of readings started over every year, but late in the 20th Century Vatican II expanded it to three years, and many Protestant groups followed suit. The Revised Common Lectionary, as it is called today, was designed to be very similar to the Catholic lectionary as an expression of our unity as Christians. It is organized by the Consultation on Common Texts, which gathers representatives of all the major groups who use it. If you'll indulge a proud wife moment, my husband, Taylor, is the current chair of the group.

The lectionary is a valuable expression of unity in Christ, but it is also a valuable spiritual discipline. The lessons follow the seasons of the church year, which follow the life and ministry of Jesus. Every year from Advent to Easter, the lessons help us walk with Jesus from the

anticipation of his birth to his death and resurrection. Then after Easter, during the season after Pentecost, the lectionary helps us remember the teachings of Jesus and the mission of God in the world. There are three years of readings. Year A focuses on Matthew, Year B on Mark, Year C on Luke. John is sprinkled in to all three years. Lessons from the Hebrew scriptures and from the rest of the Christian scriptures are part of the cycle as well. If you are here every Sunday for all three years, you will hear most of the scriptures.

Because we follow the lectionary, the texts we read are not just the ones the preacher happens to like. They are given to us and to the whole church. We share with our brothers and sisters in Christ in hearing and responding.

So on that day, Jesus read the scriptures, like we do here. Then he taught, sort of like giving a sermon. The unclean spirit, one of those evil forces we talked about earlier, did not like what Jesus had to say. It got defensive. It called out, "What have you to do with us?" I'm sure things got very uncomfortable for the man and for all gathered around. But in the end, by stirring up this unclean spirit, the man was healed.

Preaching and teaching in the pattern of Jesus is supposed to accomplish what happened that day. The scriptures and the preaching are supposed to stir up that which is unclean in us all in order to set us free.

I am not saying that if you ever feel uncomfortable or angry in a sermon, you must be possessed by a demon and something is terribly wrong. That's not the point. But in our own ways we all know there is evil in us and around us. The teaching of Jesus disturbed the unclean spirit so it could be cast out. It was not a comfortable process, but the man left the synagogue better than when he came.

Trust me, it would be much easier to preach happy sermons every week. It is much easier to preach in ways that let the unclean spirits sleep. But sometimes the lessons given to us wake them up. If we ignore them, we ignore the possibility of healing. The evil in us and in the world around us has to be rebuked so it can come out.

Where preachers sometimes get into trouble is in rebuking evil in others without acknowledging it in ourselves. I hope you all know that if I bring up a hard thing, it is because I'm dealing with it, too. If part of you feels singled out and wants to cry out, "What have you to do with me?" trust me, I'm feeling the same way. But the goal in bringing up these hard things is to hear a healing word of Jesus. Be silent, and come out of him.

We save and post a lot of sermons here. I'm not saying they will want to, but if they want to, future generations will be able to look back and know what was being preached at St. Thomas in 2018. I wish that had been an option 60 years ago. I wish I could have heard Dewey Gable who preached in ways that helped this church get off to a good start. Or Hal Daniell, who by all accounts was a prophet for justice. Or John Bouchet who had a short-lived tenure here. Or Charlie Roper, who said he never knew what would come out of his mouth when he stepped into

the pulpit but it obviously blessed a lot of people. Or the many, many women. Beverly McEachern, the second woman priest in the diocese, who served here. Or Lori Lowe, who got her first chance at leading a congregation by serving as interim rector here. Or Ruth Pattison, who I see at gatherings from time to time and who still remembers St. Thomas very fondly. Or Doug Turley, who held this church together in a time of transition. Or Doug Hahn, who made it clear St. Thomas would welcome all people, when many churches were telling LGBT Christians to go elsewhere. Or Pat Merchant, who has become a valued colleague and who I'm sure told it like it is.

The very first thing Jesus did in his ministry was read the scriptures and teach. As a result, a man was healed. Lord Jesus, speak to us, that we too may be healed.

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