

## **Sanctuary**

A Sermon Preached by the  
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February 1, 2009  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
Mark 1:21-28

Here we are again. Another Sunday in ordinary time, nothing unusual or remarkable about it, really. The order of worship is familiar, no surprises there. Look at your bulletin: we assemble in God's name, we call ourselves and one another to worship, sing a familiar hymn, confess our sins, greet one another with the peace of Christ. We hear God's Word in the reading of holy scripture and the proclamation of the Gospel, and we respond by affirming our faith, bringing our offerings to God, and gathering at the table for the Lord's Supper. And we are sent forth to do God's work in the world, preferably after the pancake breakfast and the Super Bowl. Just an ordinary Sunday morning.

Likewise, it was a typical Sabbath that day in Capernaum, with nothing remarkable in the order of worship. A time for people to gather for worship in the synagogue, greet their neighbors, hear the Torah read and interpreted, probably with some lively debate about the meaning, maybe a bar mitzvah, we don't know. But from what little that Mark has to say about it, there is nothing to indicate that it was anything more than an ordinary Sabbath, except perhaps that Jesus was taking his turn teaching. And that right there should have sent up a red flag.

"Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit" which brought everything to a screeching halt, because on an ordinary Sabbath, on an ordinary Sunday morning, you don't expect that kind of disruption to a worship service. One pastor put it this way: "You come for worship all polished, clean and neat, ready to go to brunch afterwards, and you expect to sit with other people who are clean and neat and well-behaved. You know the basic etiquette, you don't take pictures, you don't act like tourists and walk around like you're (visiting a 12<sup>th</sup> century cathedral) or something like that while the service is going on. You turn off your cell phone, and your Blackberry, and shut out the world. You sing the hymns, you listen politely, you maybe even drift off to sleep during the sermon. I know that's hard to imagine, but it happens.

"We think of church as restful, predictable, too, the way most of us like our worship. Nothing ever changes here. Maybe you've heard that light bulb joke about *how many Presbyterians it takes to change a light bulb*. And the answer is 'Change?!?'"<sup>1</sup>

Well, it was probably that way in Capernaum too. A nice little synagogue, comfortable, predictable, no one really expecting that kind of disruption to the Sabbath service. But it happens sometimes, and when it does, everything goes quiet, the ushers are paralyzed for a moment, unsure of how they're supposed to respond, the preacher usually stops –

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<sup>1</sup> Jon M. Walton, "No Sanctuary in the Sanctuary," January 29, 2006, First Presbyterian Church, New York, NY.

or at least pauses – and, after that first gasp, everyone holds their breath until things are under control again, and you hear that collective sigh of relief. It's like when the one-year old falls and hits her head – that moment of absolute silence before she realizes that it hurts and it's time to let loose with an ear-piercing shriek that no amount of holding and kissing and soothing can waylay. It can be a long and terrifying moment before everyone springs into action and takes care of it in the most calm and orderly way.

Jon Walton is the pastor at First Presbyterian Church in New York City, which sits at the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue, no more than a couple of blocks away from the stone arches at the entrance to Washington Square Park in the West Village. And while the park has undergone some renovation and cleaning-up in recent years, drug deals still go down, and the homeless sleep under cardboard comforters on park benches alongside the up-and-coming young professionals who have brought their dogs to the enclosed dog play area. It's a wonderful microcosm of life in the city, and no one knows better than an inner-city pastor that once you open the doors of the church, life comes in. Rev. Walton describes it this way: "When you open the doors of the church, life in all its forms and with all its complexity comes barging into the sanctuary. . . Real frustrations, phobias, fits and fears in the sanctuary." He reminds his listeners that, "The only way to keep the sanctuary quiet and peaceful would be to keep it locked and empty. In reality, once the doors are open there is no sanctuary in the sanctuary. Every human need can come in the door, every fear can take a seat in the pew, every broken spirit can come in and cry, every rejected heart can take a place, sinners may sit next to saints, the virtuous next to the virtueless, the disturbed next to the peaceful in spirit."<sup>2</sup>

The truth is that in most congregations, Rev. Walton's included, that doesn't describe what just wanders in off the streets. It's what comes through the front doors every Sunday morning and sits down in the pew right next to you. For every one of us who comes for solace and peace of mind, there is another of us who comes in with a spirit in turmoil, desperately battling demons we know nothing about. For every one of us who comes in with nothing more on our mind than where to go for Sunday brunch, there is another of us who can't figure out how we're going to buy enough groceries to get us through the week, much less what we'll have for brunch.

For every one of us who has sent the sympathy card or come to the memorial service or made the phone call, there is another of us whose heart hasn't mended, whose grief is still debilitating, whose days go by in deep sadness. For every one of us who gets out the crossword puzzle, or gets busy texting, or drifts off during the sermon, there is another of us who is desperate for a word of hope, clinging to whatever life raft the Word throws out to them. But because most of us are really good at hiding whatever is keeping us up at night or robbing us of our sanity, whatever is keeping us from happiness or health or wholeness of mind and body and spirit, we go on about our business, never realizing the pain or the anger or the despair that's just beneath the surface.

That realization can be a painful lesson to learn. During my last year in seminary, I was a student intern at my home church, Macalester-Plymouth in St. Paul. One Friday night early in the fall, I was called to the home of a long-time member who had taken his own life, leaving behind the wife who had found him in the car in the garage, and two daughters, not much older than teenagers. Thinking back, he couldn't have been as old

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

as I am now. I had seen him week after week in worship, had visited with him during coffee hour, knew his family as well as I knew most of the congregation, but never, ever knew that he suffered from depression, that he was apparently holding on by a single thread.

In his sermon at the memorial service, the pastor reminded all of us that we can never know the depth of another person's sadness or despair, that we can never fully understand what moves a person to take his or her own life, nor can we always prevent it from happening. But since then, I've tried to pay closer attention, to listen more carefully for a call for help, to read what's behind someone's eyes. I'm not always successful – few of us are – but that night with that family is always in the back of my mind.

Those people in Capernaum might not have noticed the man in the synagogue with the unclean spirit, if he hadn't been so vocal, if he hadn't directly confronted Jesus and disrupted the whole worship service. We might not have noticed it either. Like so many accounts of healing and exorcisms, this one is tucked into another story – a story within a story, that doesn't get top billing.

The bigger story, the headliner if you will, was the authority with which Jesus taught and the astonishment it produced in the congregation. But one thing is notable in Mark that we don't have in the other gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. In Mark, Jesus' teaching is acting and his acting is teaching. He teaches us by showing us what to do, how to act. The other gospels are much more focused on Jesus' words. In Matthew, he sits down and teaches the disciples. In Luke, Jesus begins his ministry by going into the synagogue and reading from the prophet Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free.

In Mark, we see dramatic, powerful actions that proclaim just as surely as words that the promises of God are true. Jesus is depicted as almost constantly on the move. A favorite word in Mark is the Greek word meaning *immediately*, or *at once*, or *just then*, which is used about forty times in sixteen chapters. There is an urgency in Mark that we don't find in the other gospels.

This story barely unfolds when the man possessed of an unclean spirit suddenly appears. "*Just then* there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit." We have no idea where he came from or what he's doing there. We have no idea how he got in, we don't read of him bursting through the doors or barging into the middle of the temple. It's almost as if he appears from within, almost as if he's the spirit of the synagogue, that will continue to confront Jesus everywhere he goes, and will eventually lead to his death.

But at this moment, in the synagogue at Capernaum, at the beginning of his ministry, along with the astonishing authority of Jesus' teaching, there is an equally astonishing moment of healing. The teaching is not what Jesus is reading from the Torah, not the debate with the scribes. We don't even know what scripture was read that day. The real teaching is the act of healing, of confronting and naming the spirit that is at work, and overcoming it. Remember that the synagogue was an extremely powerful institution. It was where people came to receive religious instruction, to be directed in the ways of God. It was where the scribes, those entrusted with the Torah, were in control. The religious establishment was one of the major powers at work in people's lives, and it had

already become a power of oppression rather than liberation, a power that constrained and diminished the lives of ordinary people.

There are many levels to this story that we simply cannot relate to. Exorcisms, for example. Rarely sought or acknowledged in the Protestant mainstream, they have become the stuff of horror movies, with spectacular head-spinning special effects. And, as one commentator noted, “While we are painfully aware of the challenges of mental health issues and our need to respond with love and inclusion, the notion that these might be caused by ‘unclean spirits’ is scandalous and a vestige of an outmoded worldview and understanding of human life according to post-Enlightenment thinking,” But is there any wisdom to be gained, does this passage somehow reflect the prophetic healing of institutions as well as individuals?<sup>3</sup>

With this teaching, with this act of healing, Jesus’ ministry was immediately revealed as one that would call upon a different power, that would create a space for a different spirit, the spirit of life. A common theme that runs through almost all of the accounts of healing is that the person who has been healed is restored to life in the community. Whatever has kept that person from being accepted and welcome and fully engaged is gone, is healed. Think of the woman who dared to touch the hem of Jesus’ robe, or the leper begging to be healed. Think of the paralyzed man being let down through the roof by his friends so that he might see Jesus and feel his healing touch.

Reflecting on life in a congregation, Jon Walton concludes, “This is the good news inherent in this story. That God is here, that the authority and power of Jesus still amazes us sometimes, and that the healing that was performed at Capernaum can happen here as well. . . (because) here the demons are named and cast out. Here the broken in spirit are made strong again. Here the tears of those who weep are dried . . . here those who are hungry to know God and to see God wait with patience and listen with hope to sit at the feet of Jesus whose word still astonishes.”<sup>4</sup>

We like our sanctuary to be a place of rest, of respite, where we can leave the everyday world with all of its stress and challenge and temptation behind, if only for a short while. And it is a place of peace, a place that soothes the weary and restless spirit, as our spirits are quieted and settled this morning. But as one writer so aptly put it, “Ever since Jesus taught at the synagogue in Capernaum, the sanctuary has also been a place of spiritual confrontation, not just where the afflicted are made comfortable, but also where the comfortable are afflicted.”

At our best, that’s what the church can be. At our very best, that’s who we are – a sanctuary, the place where the stories within the story are played out, where the demons are named for what they are, and where healing is offered in the form of hope and trust and love, where those who suffer are healed and restored to the community that loves them. May it always be so in this beloved community. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Epperly, [www.processandfaith.org](http://www.processandfaith.org), February 1, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Walton