

4th Sunday after the Epiphany B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalms 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

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My goodness, here we are still in the very first chapter of the Gospel of Mark and we discover that it is action packed right from the beginning. Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four, it's also the first one written and unlike Luke or John's long narratives Mark's story of Jesus's life is intense and quick and heated and if you blink you are going to miss something! So don't blink and don't pause and don't take a breath, because Mark has us on the ride of our life.

Just prior to this unclean spirit being cast out basically two things happen: firstly, he was baptized, and then secondly he called his first disciples. And immediately after calling those first disciples, Simon, Andrew, James and John, Jesus goes to the synagogue to teach. And right away they recognize that there is something different about this person. He teaches with authority; and I love this translation from *The Message* because it says he taught *not quibbling and quarreling like the religion scholars*.

And what they notice that is so different about his teaching is that it was forthright it was confident, teaching that spoke to their lives and experience rather than learning for learning sake. For example, in confirmation classes these last couple weeks we've been learning about the 10 Commandments. We've been learning a little bit through memorization, but what is really important is that our students would understand what this means to their lives today. The same could be said for any of us, that the Scriptures, our prayers, the worship services need to be able to speak to us to what we're going through in our own lives.

For thousands of years, and I do mean thousands, God has provided prophets, priests, pastors to help with our understanding of God's will in our lives. Of course it's a difficult job and of course these people are only human, but nonetheless it has been an important and meaningful role to have dedicated leaders in our faith communities. If we look back at the reading from Deuteronomy we see that this role was so important that as Moses was coming to the end of his time, the people they were seeking assurance that God would continue to speak to them. They were worried that once Moses would be gone that their connection or their link to God would be lost. But Moses assures them that God would raise up for them "a prophet like me." Indicating that the relationship between God and people, priest, prophet, mediator would continue. And so it has.

However, one of the most important things to understand as people of faith is that even though Jesus is our living God, even though we continue to call forward priests and pastors in our tradition to guide us, there is still an essential and necessary part for each and every person.

Looking again at this story from the Gospel of Mark we see that being a person of faith goes far beyond the classroom. Remember I said that Marks Gospel moves very quickly: in this first chapter Jesus is baptized, calls his first disciples, immediately starts teaching in the synagogue and then immediately puts his new and authoritative and radical teaching into practice by exorcising an unclean spirit on the Sabbath.

He is modeling for those brand-new apostles what a life of commitment to God should look like: God teaches, we listen, we do. Jesus taught, the people listened (and they were amazed) and then Jesus does! He shows them a living example of love and care and healing. And we should not miss the point that it was a radical thing to do on the Sabbath, a day that no work should be done, and yes, healing was considered work. This story demonstrates that the life Jesus calls us into means putting the importance of love and compassion and care for one another over and above rules or regulations or doctrines or laws. That's because there is a huge difference between saying something and doing something.

Healing on the Sabbath, Jesus breaks the Law. For this first infraction, he sort of gets a pass. There wasn't a lot of fuss made about it this time, but when it happens again, and it does, they conspire together to do something about him.

Putting faith into action is at its least, uncomfortable and at its worst, dangerous. It cannot be any other way because every time we put love of neighbor first on our priority list it is inevitably going to clash with the status quo or objectives of politics, economics, white privilege, or any other group in the majority or in power. That's what happened to Jesus. He stood his ground on the commandment to love all the way to Good Friday.

This month at Holy Spirit we have been focusing on the work of inclusion and affirmation that has been given to us for just about a decade now. And it surprises me sometimes at how difficult this work continues to be. I know I've said many times how important this work is in the lives of LGBTQ people and their families. We are a sanctuary for many who would otherwise not have a place of worship. But this work is not only about us welcoming them, it is about God being at work amongst us all. We don't welcome people in so that we may change them, we are all welcome in this place so that we all may be changed, loved and cared for by each other. Each of us is a unique person and a beloved child of God bringing with us all that makes us special, including our brokenness our failures and gifts. This congregation "broke the law" many years ago with the bold and agonizing steps you took; and there was a cost to living that commitment. But the cost to not moving at all, to rigidity, the cost of faith without action is far more debilitating.

Love is expensive. You know this, you live this. But there simply is no other way than love, radical love. As we journey in worship toward Good Friday, Jesus teaches us again and again that love is expensive, may we listen and continue to live it.

Amen.