



January 31, 2021

Mark 1: 21-28

Coming to Church
The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding

If I don't quote Emily Dickinson from time to time, I worry about losing my New Englander card. So let's begin with a few familiar lines that offer a useful narthex through which to enter the sanctuary of our worship this morning:

*Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
I keep it, staying at Home –
With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
And an Orchard, for a Dome –*

*Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
I, just wear my Wings –
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton – sings.¹*

On this particular Sunday, which also marks the occasion of our Annual Meeting, we start such a long way from Emily's orchard. For us, under the veil of the pandemic, going to church means, precisely, staying at home. YouTube and FaceBook screens are hardly satisfying substitutes for either a bobolink or an orchard, or for that certain energy that we all remember pulsing in this room in response to a soaring voluntary or a powerful reading, an exquisite anthem or an eloquent prayer or just the sight of a beloved face. The threat of illness has forced us to do our Sabbath – keeping at home.

So it's interesting to notice how, in the very first episode of Jesus's ministry – as it's narrated in Mark, the earliest gospel – illness is waiting to greet Jesus and his fisherman-friends inside the very sanctuary when they go to keep their Sabbath.

“They went to Capernaum,” the story says; “and when the Sabbath came” – as though it was just what they would do, following the trail of habit and disposition – they “entered the synagogue”. It could well be that the fishermen Peter and Andrew, James and John (whom Jesus had just recently met on the beach) were familiar neighbors in the seaside town of Capernaum, even members of the local synagogue. But Nazareth is a good 20 miles inland, so evidently Jesus was unknown there. Maybe, come the Sabbath, the fishermen invited him to

¹ Emily Dickinson [poem 236], [The Poems of Emily Dickinson](#) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

their place of worship. His way of teaching certainly seems to have been a breath of fresh air for the congregation: “the people were astounded by his teaching,” says Mark.

But what happens next wrenches everyone out of any reveries of sublime Sabbath-keeping. “Just then,” says Mark – and the word, really, is “immediately,” one of Mark’s favorite words for describing the energy that seems to coalesce around Jesus – *right away* “there was a person with an unclean spirit” in the synagogue, crying out, disturbing the sanctity and the inspiration of the service, up-ending the very first moments of Jesus’s ministry.

Someone is there in the sanctuary who is disturbed. In the pre-psychological understanding of Mark’s day, this person’s spirit had been overtaken by a kind of destructive malevolence that unbalanced him, pushed him out of reach of the community around him. And, in the social understanding of his day (and, alas, of our own day), this “demon” made the person dangerous, pushed him beyond the concern of many, beyond the effort of most.

Interestingly, when this agitated, anguished person speaks, it’s with a voice that identifies Jesus, can already name the power that Jesus contains: “You are the holy one of God.” And he seems to be asking for Jesus to use that power to do what others around him will not do: to reach to him, to understand him, to take him back. And in a way that we grasp with faith if not really with full understanding, Jesus does have the power to unburden this person: to distinguish between his soul and the illness that is tormenting his spirit, and see him whole. Mark tells us that the gathered crowd is amazed by the new kind of authority that Jesus wields – and so, not surprisingly, news of the Sabbath-day drama spread quickly in the vicinity.

We can’t begrudge Emily Dickinson her preference for the serenity of apple blossoms and the anthems of bobolinks as she goes walking in the beauty of nature. We’ve all been there. It’s a long way from the orchards of Amherst to the synagogue at Capernaum – or, maybe, to the pandemic-ravaged sanctuaries of all the world’s houses of worship today, with their pews bereft of those pulses of communal energy and their congregations scattered into isolation. That’s another kind of nature: it’s in the nature of life on this planet, not only to promulgate beauty, but also to spawn its share of disturbance. The beauty of the orchard has a tendency to be rooted somewhere, and it’s a blessing to us to be able to go to see it where it blooms – sanctuary as arboretum. But struggle and suffering are often mobile – which is, in its way, another kind of blessing, because at least it can move to seek help – sanctuary as ambulance. And one of the places it comes is – to church.

I think it shouldn’t surprise us that Jesus was greeted, during the very first recorded day of his ministry, with struggle and suffering that “came to church,” as it were, to meet him there. I think we don’t call this sort of place a “sanctuary” because it’s “safe from” – or, at least, not only for that reason; I think we use that word because it’s also “safe for.”

The wounds of the world – especially the soul-wounds, the relationship-wounds, the history-wounds, the spirit-wounds – come in through *that* door – drawn perhaps, as we heard last week (in the words of Madeline L’Engle²) by “a light so lovely that they want with all their heart to know the source of it.” I think we recognize this pattern. I think it’s inscribed in the bones of this congregation – and, for that matter, of any group of faithful people who are doing the best they can to pool whatever love they have, whatever gifts they’ve been given, whatever energy they can find for making things right in the world. The truth of coming to church is that, however the healing and hope of Christ may be present in the sanctuary, it’s going to draw to itself whatever need or rawness, whatever anger or bitterness, whatever thrashing anguish even, may be in the vicinity. The lovely light, the lure of wholeness, will draw the brokenness forward, to enact itself and maybe even to name

² Madeline L’Engle, Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art (Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1980).

itself on its way to healing and deliverance – as the so-called “unclean spirit” did in the very first episode of Jesus’s ministry.

And lest we personify that soul-sickness too narrowly, and imagine (as people in pre-scientific cultures did) that disintegration defines a person and eclipses any integrity they might contain – lest we make that terrible mistake, let’s acknowledge that, where the sin-sick soul is concerned, no one has achieved immunity. We don’t care much, any more, for the suggestion that such anguish is “unclean” – I prefer to understand it as undermining integration, being out of balance, craving soundness. But whatever it is, it’s *always* coming to church – because church is where that which longs for integration and wholeness comes to find its peace, its settled place, its sanctuary.

Mark writes that Jesus’s teaching astonished the congregation in that sanctuary. They said it was because “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” What the Greek word “authority” is really trying to get at is that the truth of the teaching comes from deep within him – literally, “out of one’s own being”. The truly astonishing thing about Jesus’ teaching seems to have been that its authority came, not from its pedigree or its past or its pages – not the “by the book” kind of authority of the scribes – but from its *authenticity*: from the integrity with which the teaching was reflected in the person of the teacher, from the way the truth of it came out of his own soul.

But this really shouldn’t surprise us.

Authenticity is irresistible. It goes hand in hand with integrity. Really, when you think about it (for instance, on Annual Meeting Sunday), the life and work of such a thing as a church is based on one core principle of spiritual public health, which is that wholeness is contagious. Integrity is something you can catch. Authenticity is communicable. If it weren’t so, then maybe Jesus would have just encouraged us to stay at home – or take a walk. Instead he said – let’s gather at the Table. Meet me in the body. Where a few are gathered together, and call me by name, I’ll be there – and I bet you’ll find you want to keep coming back. Keep coming to church.

In fairness to Emily Dickinson, her poem about idiosyncratic Sabbath-keeping has one more stanza:

*God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
I’m going, all along.*

She’s probably right, I think, that really the sermon never long – just six words, maybe: *transparent – to – the – love – of – God*. And I’m sure she’s right that we’re as likely to hear it while walking or watching as we are while overtly worshipping. Really, it seems to me, going all along is the only way.

But when the time comes that we are coming to church – literally, as we so long to do, or figuratively, as we’re doing for the time being – we might remind ourselves to expect that the balm that’s waiting here, in Gilead, will over and over again draw the sin-sick soul in to the safety of the sanctuary – the place that’s safe

from *and* safe for – where the One who can always see us whole and distinct from whatever burdens may have overtaken our spirits, waits to welcome us home.

In that hope, then – on this Annual Meeting Sunday – I offer this Franciscan blessing for our church –

*May we be blessed with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
so that we may live from deep within our hearts.*

*May we be blessed with anger, at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creation,
so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.*

*May we be blessed with tears, to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,
so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and, to turn their pain into joy.*

*And may we be blessed with just enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in the world,
so that we can do what others claim cannot be done:*

to bring justice and kindness to our children, and to all our neighbors.

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