



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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When Love is the Authority

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 1, 2015
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany: Based on Mark 1: 21-28*

Last Sunday we were faced with an epic, catastrophic snowstorm barreling down upon us. As it turned out for us in the city—happily so—it was more apocryphal than apocalyptic, which is almost always a good thing. Today we face a different kind of hype, one with serious potential consequence only for the gamblers among us: the Super Bowl. And, yet, almost 152 million of us will tune in for it later today, during which 1 billion chicken wings will be eaten. My knowledge of that last fact is all the evidence one ever needs to argue that when all is said and done, the Internet is not a good thing. It seems only right that to begin this day we encounter a story of Jesus casting an unclean spirit out of a man, whom we would unkindly and yet certainly call crazy. We hear this story just before or just after having the Annual Meeting of St. Bartholomew's Church. I shall vacate the pulpit immediately to anyone who would like a shot at connecting these stories in a meaningful way.

I can't do much with the Super Bowl and the chicken wings. And as to casting out unclean spirits among church people, let's just say that though highly experienced in the field, I am way too smart to go near that topic! But I do indeed believe that this short dramatic account goes to the heart of who Jesus was and actually has a great deal to teach us about the future of St. Bart's and beyond that the future of the church. In the narrative, this is the first event that occurs after the calling of the disciples, and in some very important ways it sets the tone for what all of Jesus' ministry would be like, thereby showing us, I believe, what is important for those of us who would follow him.

On the Sabbath Jesus went to the synagogue. You can hear that if you wish as a lesson that we "should" go to church. I don't know about that. As far as I know, Jesus never told anyone else to go to synagogue; he went himself because he loved going. Beyond that, Jesus had no notion of "church"; he certainly did not come to start one. He was a Jew who loved the synagogue. What is undeniable is that he sanctified his life with the regular practice of his faith. I suppose there were times when he did not feel like going, but there is ample evidence that when the Sabbath rolled around, Jesus was to be found among the gathered. I think that it is not an unsupportable leap to claim that if our practice of faith sanctifies—that is, if it sets apart, makes holy—our lives, we would do well to avail ourselves of it. But that must come from our desire; a meaningful practice of the faith is always in the end based on choice, not on obligation. The former is life giving; the latter is not.

Somewhat oddly, given that he was a carpenter and not a scribe or other religious professional, Jesus taught when he went to the synagogue. Although there are several accounts of his getting in trouble for doing so, we do not know exactly what he taught, certainly not from this passage. Even later in Mark when we hear some of Jesus' teaching, what we hear are stories, parables; some we get, most we don't. But we do know two things: He did not teach as the scribes did, and he taught with authority. The scribes appropriately were concerned with the minutia of the law. Their authority came from their impressive command of the voluminous Torah and their capacity to quote chapter and verse. These were learned men; and though we might say that their learning was narrowly focused, we cannot fault them on their devotion to the law.

Jesus' authority came from something else. From the parables, we know that he talked about real life, drawing from everyday experience. The morals of many of his stories derived from common sense, a sense of goodness and of right and wrong that normal people would understand. When he told the story of the slave—who, immediately upon being forgiven all he owed, refused any latitude for another person who owed him—people got the moral of

the story. The teaching was clear and the authority flowed from its making good sense. The simple practice of teaching in this way both profoundly affected the way one could be religious and honored the presence of God in their ordinary world. It no longer was dependent upon an esoteric knowledge of an ancient and beloved text but could be practiced in daily life. It is for this reason that the followers of Jesus began to understand themselves as teachers of “the Way,” the *Didache*, as it was known in *Koine* (or common) Greek.

Our challenge is to keep the practice of faith real. If it—the way we worship, for example—becomes so rarefied that it requires an insider’s knowledge of “our” music, of “our” understanding of scripture, of “our” way of praying and worshipping, it will not ultimately thrive. It is perfectly permissible—and is done all the time—to say, “Well, we can’t stop being who we are, simply to get others to want to come.” We can say that until we are blue in the face or until the church is empty: It’s our choice. It is not about being hip and on every medium of social connection—although that is increasingly advisable; it is not about never having a beautiful mass setting again. It is about being real—about talking about things that really matter in our lives and showing with the way we respond to one another that we really mean what we say. When that is done authentically in any cultural setting, the message can get through.

Back to Palestine: In the course of his authoritative teaching, a man with an unclean spirit interrupted Jesus. For the time being, ignore the whole exorcism part of the story; we will come back to that. The first sign to me that Jesus was up to something new was how he handled this “problem.” Honestly, had I been he (Jesus, that is) when someone interrupted my preaching, I would have looked around immediately for Corey or one of our security guards—yet more unneeded evidence that I am quite different from Jesus. Far from having the man removed, Jesus confronted him in the state he found him—disturbed, burdened, oppressed by a demon. Jesus stopped the important business of the synagogue—the liturgy, we would call it—and looked into the eyes of this poor man and spoke words of healing. And in that powerful act of love, he set him free.

And there it is. In that moment Jesus did what he came to do: He came to set us free—not from our sins, no matter how deeply ingrained that notion may be in our thinking—but to show us the way to freedom and wholeness, to show us the way to put on, in the words of Paul, the “mind of Christ”—to be *like* Jesus. If we find freedom and wholeness and become like Jesus, the sin question will take care of itself. That doesn’t mean we will be sinless, which was never why Jesus came in the first place; it means we will be centered in God.

I don’t know what it means that the demon came screaming out of this poor guy. When forced to show my cards, I don’t take much comfort in the physical miracles of Jesus, not as evidence of how God has ever acted, the realities of my experience and priesthood being weighed heavily in the other direction. I read them as metaphorical; notice that I did not say “just” metaphorical. We are symbolic people; the metaphor is real. What I bear unequivocal witness to is the power of God’s healing in our lives. I have seen people set free, and I have tasted the freedom myself. I have seen the demons that face our world—this world, right now. The grip of greed and the desire for more and more wrecks our lives and never delivers what it promises. I have seen that in action and have felt its draw in my own life. The insatiable need for approval and acceptance at any cost, the constant cry of “love me, love me, love me,” can make us desperately crazy. Not a single one of the affirmations sought from that core of need ever lasts long enough to calm our desperate spirits. I have seen the demon of force and power; I have felt its artificial and short-lived assurance. Demons are alive and well among us.

Our challenge is to face them with the authority of love, for only love will bring us the freedom we all desperately need and desire. We don’t mete out judgment or punishment—not about religion; we don’t prescribe one final and ultimate answer—because in the end, we don’t really know that much. We just love. And, then, no matter what happens—*no matter what happens*—we will be fine. It doesn’t save us from the brutality of religious extremism. I don’t have any answers for that; and if I tried to offer any, you’d rightly stop listening. But what I do know is that the authority of love will transform us. Is that enough? I think so—for love has the power to calm our madness so that we can be a part of bringing healing to the world.

In the name of God: *Amen*.