

January 29, 2012

**The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

Mark 1:21-28

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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In today's gospel story it is easy to get caught-up in all the characters, there are lots of people talking – the disciples, the crowd, the scribes, there's a demon, and Jesus. And then it is also easy to get caught-up in the overall feeling of awe expressed by the crowd over these divine displays of authority. *It almost sounds to me like women swooning "my, what authority!"* God is powerful. But if we allow ourselves to become distracted by awe and the struggle of dominance between good and evil we might just miss the heart of what is going on here. There is still one more person, one more character in this story. Someone who is easily overlooked and forgotten: the nameless afflicted man who is suffering with the demon possession. In the gospel we hear the demon speak, but the man himself is never given a voice. And so even as he stands at the center of it all, he is easy to disregard, to forget. The scribes and the disciples don't pay attention to him – they focus on their awe-filled experience of divine authority, Mark, the writer of the gospel, doesn't even bother to give this man a name. It is quite understandable how he can be completely disregarded, written-off, but there is one who notices him, there is one in this story who cares about his wellbeing. Jesus, God.

Jesus sees this unnamed man. He looks into his eyes and sees their expression, he reads his face and watches as the pain falls across it – Jesus sees the man, all of him including his illness. Within the community an unclean spirit or a demon would have marked this man as amoral which would have made him an outcast – literally placed out at the margins of society – where it is literally so easy to be overlooked. The isolation that comes with being marginalized is extreme and inhumane – people see you with their eyes, but not with their heart. So it is no wonder that the other people in the gospel story don't pay any attention to this man – he has become less of a human and more of an object to be avoided. He is seen as a problem, an illness, and not seen as the full person he is. But Jesus sees that man, he sees the person who has been occluded by demonic possession. And he seeks justice, freedom, release for him. He may be unnamed by society, shunned, cast aside, anonymous, and still he is beloved by God. And so, Jesus speaks. He gives voice, offering healing words – words that transform. And the man is freed from the domination of evil and he is restored to who he was created to be.

Geoffrey reminded me after the last service that when Mark employs an unnamed person, they are "every man." They represent all of us, so we should pay attention. None of us are exempt from struggling with our own demons. We each have our own stuff that enslaves us, that we battle with – stuff that prevents us from being completely free to love God and only God, stuff that weighs heavy on us and prevents us from growing fully into the people we were created by God to be. Sometimes the demons grow large and completely overshadow us as we struggle with shame and anxiety from losing a job, or deciding to end a marriage, or drowning financially – maybe even facing

losing our homes. And so we know what it is to feel isolated, ostracized, pushed to the outside. We know what it is to be this afflicted man. We must remember that we are not forgotten, we are beloved. Even when it feels the whole world has forgotten us, God knows us and cherishes us. And so we keep our eyes open for God to come near.

Discipleship, following Jesus challenges us to see this very same world, our world but with new eyes – eyes of compassion, eyes that seek opportunities for justice, eyes that know to look for glimpses of the kingdom of God drawing near, eyes that can see transformation and grace all around us.

Everyone else missed this man – they remained blind to the possibility for transformation within him. Jesus saw him. He saw suffering, but he also saw love, redemption, justice. Today we are again reminded that none of God's creatures are expendable we are each and every one of infinite value, filled with endless possibility. Put simply, we are all beloved. God cares for the voiceless, nameless, folks on the margins, God values and loves the poor in spirit just as he values and loves you and me.

Last week we heard the call of the disciples and now the very first thing he does with these fledgling disciples is teach them a new way of being in the world – a different way of seeing, a countercultural way of responding to the world around them. This way of being in the world not only requires seeing the person who is overlooked by everyone else, but responding to seeing them with a sense of justice. It's not just a matter of seeing, but it goes deeper, it requires a just engagement and response.

So this word authority that the scribes and the crowds keep gushing over, it is not the same as power. It can be tempting to equate the two, but in the Greek power is actually a different word. The word authority here in this part of the gospel is better described as a right or a willingness to see justice served. So Jesus sees this sick man, sees the devastating effects of the illness on his well-being, and he sees a just need for healing. He responds with love performing a miracle and life is restored, renewed, transformed.

When I was 21 just out of college, I worked at a school for severely emotionally disturbed children. There were 12 kids in my elementary school classroom and they each struggled with incredibly challenging home lives, at the very young ages of 8, 9, 10 years old they each already had many burdens weighing them down. Sawatos was a little girl who particularly captured my heart. She had a sparkle in her eyes most of the time, she loved to tickle people and make them laugh. She was silly and loved to laugh herself. What I loved most about working with Sawatos was that she was eager to learn and to grow. But when Sawatos was overcome with difficult emotions – anger, frustration, anxiety – she would immediately transform into this chaotic, physical, flailing, at times violent, and very disruptive little being. And so that's how people saw her – the teachers in the school, her therapist, her mom. They saw her struggling academically because she struggled so much with her emotions. Something struck me part way through the year as I worked more and more with Sawatos. I realized that part of her physical acting out came from frustration and her frustration came from a learning disability. She told me one time, "Elizabeth, sometimes I see the letters turned around and backwards." I suspected that she was dyslexic. And so I said something to

her teacher about it, but she said, “No that’s just Sawatos.” But that just did not sit right with me. I went to the therapist, to the administrator, to anyone who would listen and I advocated to have Sawatoes tested. And finally they gave in, she was tested and in fact she did have a learning disability. And so she was given a one-on-one and tutoring to engage her in a new way to help her learn. The first time she came back into the classroom following tutoring she was beaming – so proud of herself. She got it. That burden had been lifted and what’s more, she knew she was not alone; and for a moment she was dancing into the fullness of who God created that precious little girl to be.

It does not take much for us to give voice to the voiceless, to advocate for the powerless and marginalized, to journey together toward a new vision for our world. But we must both see and seek justice so that we might all grow into the fullness of the people of God we were created to be. Open your eyes and see with your heart.