

Sermon - 1/28/18

"Power Plays"

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and Mark 1:21-28

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC

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In this morning's gospel reading Jesus entered the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath and began to teach – and he wowed the crowds. "This guy can preach!" They said. "He has authority! There is power in what he says!" They were astonished! They weren't used to it! And just about that time, when they were all thinking about getting his autograph and maybe inviting him out for lunch, their time of worship was disrupted by what the text calls an "unclean spirit." Now the word translated unclean can mean anything "impure" that is contrary to the sacred or set-apart things of God. Sacred or holy simply means *set apart for God's purposes* and so there was something about this man that was not in keeping with the sacred on that Sabbath day. We don't know what this impurity was and we don't know what this spirit within this man was up to. What Mark tells us is that the man recognized Jesus! And he also recognized his power and authority.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!"

Now you have to admit – that's a great question! "What have you to do with us, Jesus?"

There is this great scene from the musical *Godspell* when the troop of actors who have been assembled to follow Jesus begin to turn on one another. First one is tripped and then pushed and then poked and then slapped. They end up in a frenzy of hits and bumps and slaps until finally Jesus confronts them all and reminds them that he has come to teach them how to walk in God's Kingdom ways in the world. He tells them to "love their enemies" which of course they resist at first but then soon follow and all is well. (CLIP) Jesus has come to show us and to teach us what it looks like to live in God's Kingdom and he begins with the worshipping community.

The place that Jesus first goes after he calls his followers is to the place in Capernaum where the people of God worship – the Synagogue. And it is there that he encounters that which is opposed to God's Way in the world. It is in the place of worship where Jesus encounters a spirit that is not consistent with God's Kingdom. It makes me think that maybe it is a priority for us to get things in order in our own house. I am reminded of a bulletin blooper that I saw once – a misprint of a favorite hymn title – "Hymn 267 – Come Christians, Join to Sing." Except that the "g" on the end of "sing" was missing so that it read "Come Christians, Join to Sin". This story in Mark makes me wonder what sin or what impurity we may need to address in our lives and in our community of faith?

Now, we may pat ourselves on the back and say – "At least we aren't as bad as that Corinthian Church." Admittedly, in Corinth, there were lots of struggles. This predominantly gentile congregation was likely made of various groups of believers from around the city that came together for meals and worship. They had written Paul to ask for his guidance in certain areas of communal life. If you read through the letter you will notice several themes but all of them seem to relate to ways that the community is being pulled apart because of various abuses of power within the congregation. The issue addressed in this morning's reading has to do with groups in the church with differing opinions about meat – specifically meat sacrificed to idols. It was common for meat to be left over following pagan sacrificial rites and that meat was often sold in the market place. There were some within the congregation that seemed to have no issue with buying that meat for their own consumption. They rationalized that idols, while a very visible part of Corinthian culture, were not real! In other words – they didn't really represent real gods or deities since there is only one God – the Lord and Creator of all – and one Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things were made. They had arrived at a place in their own faith where they saw no conflict of interest and no concern with their behavior because their faith in the one true God was secure. Others felt like eating such meat was ritually unclean and a violation of their holiness code. They simply were not at the same place in their faith and they were disturbed by the practice because it felt like idol worship.

Paul didn't argue with those who held the belief that idols were not real, but he did state that "idolatry" still held a firm grasp on others and drew them away from worshipping the one true God. Paul indicated that there was a real danger for those with the knowledge that idols were not real. He said that their knowledge puffed them up – causing them to be arrogant, prideful, and conceited. They were so puffed up that they were unable to see that their behavior was a stumbling block to others and a disruption to the unity of the congregation. Such action is a sin against Christ and should be avoided. Paul told them that it was better to remain a vegetarian than to eat that meat and cause a brother or sister to stumble! In other words – put the needs of the community ahead of your personal needs and preferences.

Love builds up the Body of Christ! Paul wrote. Love is a force that brings together and builds up rather than dividing and tearing down. This is the power that Jesus came to give...the power of love (sing – "That's the power of love") but not the kind of romantic love that *Huey Lewis and the News* sang about. Paul was writing about the kind of life changing, transformational love that turns a person inside out – from someone internally focused to someone externally focused. Jesus is the model for that love and he invites us to let that love have its way with us.

"What have you come to do with us, Jesus?" We ask along with the man possessed by an unclean spirit! Jesus has come to set us free! – to show us about another way to use the power of God that we have been given to truly bless the world and one another. And it starts right here among the people of God.

Sally Purvis in her book, [The Power of the Cross](#) wrote that "The power of God that was shown forth in the cross is made manifest in Christian community. What is that power in community? Here Paul is explicit: it is the power to "build one another up", to enhance the well-being of others based on their concrete reality. The presence of the risen Christ in community makes possible not only a rich relationship with God but also a love that involves commitment to the well-being of the other."¹

Now I know that we long to see that enacted in the world around us. We see terrible abuses of power in the world and we long to see transformation occur. We long to see an end to abuses of power like those demonstrated in the stories heard during the trial of Larry Nassar. We long to see an end to abuses of power like those that have been shared through the #MeToo movement. As a father of three daughters, I long for a day when I do not have to be concerned about the safety of my girls at the hands of others who would choose to use their power and influence to harm, demean, intimidate, or manipulate. The power that we are given by God is not to be abused or misused to harm but rather to build up, encourage, and support others to thrive and achieve the life that God intends for all of us to live.

As God's children – as Kingdom People - we long to see a day when there are not abuses of power among militaries or police forces. We long to see a day when there are not abuses of power in politics, business, banking, trade, or education. We long for the day when there are no longer abuses of power in our schools or our homes. Where we do not fear the use of weapons in hallways or classrooms – and we do not worry about verbal, emotional, or physical abuse to spouse or child. The power that our teachers, administrators, parents, siblings, friends, and peers have is meant to love, support, encourage and build up so that we all can strive for the life that God intends for us.

Journalist and activist Dorothy Day is quoted as saying that "our problems stem from our acceptance of this dirty, rotten system." And many are trying to change the systems that they believe contribute to some of the abuses I have named. But we do not always agree about which systems need to change. And we do not always agree when there is an abuse of power. But I think we can all agree that it is people – not systems - that abuse power. And it is people that will be needed to work together to bring about the kind of change that will achieve the kind of world that we believe God is calling us to work towards. It is people, transformed by the love of God, whose own power will be transformed and turned inside out. And it starts with us.

"What have you come to do with us, Jesus?"

Kathy Escobar – Co-Pastor of The Refuge Church in Denver, Colorado, speaks about how the Kingdom of God is not over/under. What she means is that there is no hierarchy. We are all on the same level. I have heard that expressed another way – we are all on level ground at the foot of the cross! And that is where we must begin...and that is where Jesus begins. In Capernaum, Jesus goes to the synagogue and proclaims a new teaching – with authority – and with power – and he casts out that which is opposed to God and sets things right and he invites us to come with him as he sets things right in the world. Jesus goes from that little coastal town through the regions of Galilee proclaiming good news, healing the sick, casting out unclean spirits and setting people free, feeding the hungry, opening blind eyes, reminding the religious leaders of how they have been misguided and refusing to participate in the “dirty, rotten systems” that have oppressed and marginalized and divided the people of God. And Jesus is always inviting us to that same transformative work by using the authority – the power of the God of Love – to set things right in the world. But we have to stop thinking about our own wants and place the needs of the other and of the community above our own wants. That is being thoughtful and responsible about our use of power. That is using our abilities and our capacity for good – rather than being puffed up by our knowledge or our position or our opinion and blinded to the larger concerns.

I heard an interesting story on NPR that I think illustrates this well. The story was about the Center for Youth Wellness that trains its teachers to be mindful of the needs of students who have been through traumatic experiences. The piece shared about how trauma in a young person’s life – divorce, the death of a loved one, domestic violence or abuse situations – can, over time, with enough frequency – cause their brain to short circuit and basically get stuck in an agitated fight or flight state. Any time we experience something scary our adrenaline surges and we have that fight or flight response. If this part of our brain is stimulated regularly enough it will constantly view situations as being threatening and scary.

If you take this to the classroom where a traumatized child experiences a teacher who is in their face about why they didn’t get their work done or why they are acting a particular way then you might find a child either fighting back or running away. They experience something normal as being a threat and their body responds accordingly. Traditionally, schools have responded to this kind of behavior with punishment but there is a growing movement to understand student trauma and to plan for it. One teacher being interviewed said that “embracing student’s trauma means putting their needs first.” Yes – they are in school to learn but they also need to feel safe. She has had students that she knows who have not been able to sleep the night before because of some extensive trauma in their life or home and they may just need to put their head down on their desk and sleep. That classroom may be the only safe place that student knows and it is important for them to continue to feel safety there rather than feeling threatened. They teachers and administrators continue to work with students to find appropriate ways to deal with their stress and anxiety so that they can learn and thrive.ⁱⁱ

What I love about this story is the way it demonstrates a willingness to understand rather than to jump to conclusions. The teachers in this school are working with students who have been through terrible life situations in order to help bring about healing in their lives and help them remain a part of the community of the school. Should we be doing any less in our churches? We need to be using our power to strengthen the bond of unity that we have in Christ. We need to be using the power of love to build up the community and to turn that community outward into the world where there are systems at work that are opposed to the ways of God. The church is called to challenge the abuse of power in the world and remind others that our power, our abilities, our resources are gifts from God that are meant to be used for God’s glory and not our own.

New Testament scholar Tom Wright, in his commentary on Mark, writes about Jesus’ authority and power being available to the church. When the church learns again how to speak and act with the authority of Jesus – that is – the power of self-giving love - we will find both the saving power of God unleashed once more and a similar heightened opposition from the forces of darkness. But we should not fear or despair for the very power of God is with us!ⁱⁱⁱ May we use it well so that all may be lifted up and set free to live a life of love in the Kingdom of God!

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Sally B. Purvis, The Power of the Cross (Abingdon Press 1993) p. 53.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.npr.org/programs/weekend-edition-saturday/> “NPR ED”

ⁱⁱⁱ N.T. Wright, Mark for Everyone (WJK 2001) p. 12-13.