

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

January 31, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

²¹[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "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." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

St. Augustine once wrote: "Faith is mighty, but without love it profits nothing. The devils (referring to the demon possessed man in our gospel text) confessed Christ, but lacking in charity it availed nothing. They said, 'What have we to do with you?' They confessed a sort of faith, but without love. Hence they were devils."

In our gospel story today, Jesus begins his earthly ministry by going to the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath. There he begins to teach on the scriptures with a new interpretation that astounds the assembly listening to him. This new teaching was grounded in the love and grace of God. Instead of interpreting the scriptures in the way of the law, that is salvation through following the Law, Jesus opens the assembly's minds to the truth of salvation through faith in God.

Jesus teaches with such authority (he is the Word made flesh after all!) that it causes two reactions. The first reaction is that of amazement from the assembly. They are totally blown away by the new interpretation they hear from the Word. However, the other reaction Jesus' teaching causes is one of fear. That fear is expressed in the confession of the demon possessed man.

This is the power of Jesus as the Word made flesh. What Jesus proclaims brings good news and comfort to us, but it also proclaims judgment to the forces that defy and rebel against God. The power of Jesus' teaching authority draws the demon possessed man to him so that Jesus may free the man from his



torment. Even the demon must recognize who Jesus is, and that his word has come to free people from the oppressive powers of sin and death. Because of this, the demon possessed man confesses Jesus to be the “Holy One of God,” knowing fully that the demon has sealed its own fate.

This brings us to a question: what is our reaction to that authoritative word of Jesus? Do we find grace and comfort in his word, or is our reaction more like the demon possessed man who found Jesus’ word to be condemning?

If you were to ask me, I believe that we humans experience both grace and comfort as well as condemning judgment. After all, the authority of Jesus’ word causes us to have to confront the influence that sin can have over us. And while making us face our sinful behaviors can make us feel embarrassed, guilt-ridden, and ashamed, Jesus’ ultimate goal is to cast out that sin and free us from it so that we can be in loving relationship with God and with all of God’s beloved children.

Of course, what is challenging to us humans is the fact that we want to live in the false reality that we are perfect and we have no faults. We don’t want to acknowledge any sin that resides in us, because to do so would be to show weakness and vulnerability to others. Plus, we would rather not feel the unpleasant feelings of guilt and shame. Our pride gets in the way.

Yet, St. Paul tells us that “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” This is why we begin our Sunday worship each week with the *Order for Confession and Forgiveness*. The corporate confession we do as a worshipping assembly is meant to help us confront our sinfulness, not to make us feel ashamed, so that it may be revealed to Jesus so that he can cast it out of us. The demons inside us cannot escape from the power of God’s word. Jesus’ authority will draw them out. Once Jesus has cast out the demons residing in our hearts, he speaks a word of comfort through proclaiming that we are forgiven, and that God’s love has guaranteed our salvation. This proclamation of forgiveness frees our hearts to be shaped and molded by Christ’s love. And since the word of God proclaimed is about God’s love and grace, and since our sacraments are the means of grace, it becomes easier and easier for us to welcome God and neighbor into our hearts.

As more and more room is made in our hearts for God’s love, faith in Jesus as the Holy One of God grows in us. This growing faith helps us to see the world with eyes of hope rather than eyes of despair. It grounds our faith in love instead of fear, which is a very good thing in this day and age. There are so many things out in our world right now that try and control us with fear. The demons that want to cause us to rebel against God are never too far away from us. Like a shadow they shroud over us, waiting for their chance to strike our hearts. Therefore, the more we are grounded in God’s love through word and sacrament, the more we will be able to ward off the demons of fear by trusting in Jesus and the hope of freedom from death.



Over the past year, I never thought that I would have such personal challenges in addition to navigating the pandemic. Since August of 2020 I have had to deal with some significant health issues, the worst of which has been my Chronic Inflammatory Demyelinating Polyneuropathy (CIDP). This autoimmune disorder has caused me to become weak in my legs to the point where I need assistance using either a walker or wheelchair. In addition to this weakness this disease has caused me to suffer frequently from horrible pain in my back, my abdomen, and my legs. This pain is very debilitating.

Having to deal with my CIDP for the last several months has been very difficult for me and for my family. So difficult it is hard to put it into words the amount of suffering we have gone through because of this disease. And yet, in spite of all I have gone through, all that my family has gone through, I continue to hold onto the hope that healing will happen and that things will eventually get better for me and my family. If it wasn't for my loving relationship with Jesus, and Jesus' love for me, I most likely would've lost hope a long time ago, spiraling down a pit of despair. Thankfully, Jesus continues to provide his authoritative teaching so that I can remain grounded in the good news.

As Christ Jesus has done for me, it is my hope and prayer that Christ will also do the same for you. May the Word made Flesh ground us all in God's love, fill us with everlasting hope, and cast out the demons in our midst, so that our faith comes out of a place of love and not fear.

Amen.



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church