

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reconciling in Christ Sunday

Sunday, January 29, 2012

GOSPEL: Mark 1:21–28

The story has barely begun, and already the battle is joined. Jesus sides with humanity against every force that would bring death and disease. These forces recognize Jesus and know what his power means for them. This, however, is only the first fight. The war will go on much longer.

²¹They 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.

²¹Καὶ εἰσπορεύονται εἰς Καφαρναοῦμ. καὶ εὐθὺς τοῖς σάββασιν εἰσελθὼν εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν ἐδίδασκεν. ²²καὶ ἐξεπλήσσοντο ἐπὶ τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ, ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς. ²³καὶ εὐθὺς ἦν ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ αὐτῶν ἄνθρωπος ἐν πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ, καὶ ἀνέκραξεν ²⁴λέγων, Τί ἡμῖν καὶ σοί, Ἰησοῦ Ναζαρητέ; ἤλθες ἀπολέσαι ἡμᾶς; οἶδά σε τίς εἶ, ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ. ²⁵καὶ ἐπετίμησεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγων, Φιμώθητι καὶ ἔξελθε ἐξ αὐτοῦ. ²⁶καὶ σπαράξαν αὐτὸν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἀκάθαρτον καὶ φωνῆσαν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ ἐξῆλθεν ἐξ αὐτοῦ. ²⁷καὶ ἐθαμβήθησαν ἅπαντες, ὥστε συζητεῖν πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς λέγοντας, Τί ἐστὶν τοῦτο; διδαχὴ καινὴ κατ' ἐξουσίαν: καὶ τοῖς πνεύμασι τοῖς ἀκαθάρτοις ἐπιτάσσει, καὶ ὑπακούουσιν αὐτῷ. ²⁸καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἡ ἀκοὴ αὐτοῦ εὐθὺς πανταχοῦ εἰς ὅλην τὴν περιχώρον τῆς Γαλιλαίας.

“*Ti Estin Touto?! or The Church in the Closet*”

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

I have several favourite tee shirts hanging in my closet. The letters and emblems upon them signify places like *Cape May, NJ* or *Grand Marais, MN* ... or events like the *Santa Fe Century* ... or establishments like *Rivendell Bicycles* and *Harris Cyclery* (which by the way has been worn so often that both emblem and letters are barely recognizable.) From what I've seen of tee shirts and the people who wear them I could develop a whole theology of belief. We tend to display upon our bodies the things that are most important to us ... we become human bumper-stickers announcing to the world our faith systems or politics or hopes and dreams.

Among my tee shirt collection is one however that I treasure. It came from one of our young members, recently Confirmed, by the way. And it all started with some left-over words written on the whiteboard in the Zagan where the Wednesday Greek Class meets.

If you walk back there on a Sunday morning, you will usually see some of those left-over words ... a verb or noun or the explanation of a diphthong. But sometimes there is a sentence or a phrase from what we have been translating that week. And that is what happened on a

Wednesday evening when the Confirmands, Mentors and Parents were gathering for our class about a year and a half ago.

The Greek class had been translating the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, in fact the very portion you just heard read aloud a few minutes ago. It's the wonderful story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his life among the people, announcing the liberation and freedom that comes with God and God's kingdom or reign or rule.

In the Story, Jesus and some of his followers go into the Synagogue in Capernaum at the northern end of the lake we call the Sea of Galilee. It is Shabbat. Jesus teaches in the gathering. And while that is happening a man with (as Mark tells the story) "an unclean spirit" ... someone who would have only been peering in the doorway of the synagogue ... only peeking inside, at best if that ... not welcome, not invited, not allowed to come inside ... that man comes crying up to Jesus in the midst of everyone and in the midst of everyone Jesus heals the man, frees him from his demon, liberates him to the quietness of life and in a single act makes him welcome in the community.

And when this takes place, everyone begins to talk, and turning to one another they say in Mark's Storytelling Greek,

Τί ἐστὶν τοῦτο?

"What is this?!"

Not because they don't see what is taking place, but because they are – as we all are, as anyone is – surprised, amazed, thrilled ... when freedom and light are brought into what appears only to be darkness and despair. They *get* it!

It was those words that were lingering on the whiteboard that evening in the presence of Confirmands, Mentors, Parents.

And one of those Confirmands asked me what it meant ... and so I told her, and everyone, the story I just told you.

I remember saying that the real sense of the phrase is not how it is usually read in Church, something droll and uninteresting as in: "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this?'"¹

But rather it should be read the way it was written ... *What? What is this? What does it mean? Did you just see that?!*

... in other words, excitedly, because what was taking place was an event that meant that God's love was open and inviting to everyone ... not just holy people, not just religious people, not just people whose lives were clean and nice, but to everyone ... no matter what. Period.

Well on Sunday morning, that young Confirmand after Services asked me to write that Greek phrase down for her. So I did.

Τί ἐστὶν τοῦτο?

And then, some weeks later, after Services, she asked me if I would go outside the church with her and have her mother take a picture of us together saying that phrase.

Ok.

So we went outside, it was a beautiful sunny morning, and together we looked at the camera and exclaimed,

Τί ἐστὶν τοῦτο?

¹ Read with droll-ness.

And of course laughed.

Weeks went by. Until it was just before Christmas, and after one of the Services, she came up to me and gave me a box, beautifully wrapped with lovely paper, and said, “You have to open it now.”

And so I did and ...

Out came a tee shirt with

Τί ἔστιν τοῦτο?

on the front and that famous photograph on the back.

Sarah made me cry. What a Gospel-Gift to me ... I look at that tee shirt every day and remember this story, and the freedom of the reign of God where all are welcome, all are invited, all are brought into the healing Presence of the Holy One.

It's my favorite tee shirt of all time.



(Thank you, Sarah.)

Today in the Church we celebrate what we call Reconciling in Christ Sunday. It is the Sunday when along with so many other congregations in various traditions of the faith, we celebrate the witness of God's love for persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities ... that is, for everyone.

We celebrate that just as in a gathering on the north shore of the Lake in Galilee one day Jesus demonstrated directly and pointedly the opening of the love of God for all people, especially to those who have been excluded, ignored, tortured because of their humanity, made unwelcome ...
... and so do we.

For us, the Gospel came to life in this way *officially* in 1993 when our congregation became an RIC congregation of the ELCA.

At the time I thought we were late to the start ... but quickly I was told, I found out that our congregation was *the only Reconciling in Christ congregation in our Rocky Mountain Synod* ... the only one in what makes up 1/12 of the continental United States in our Church.

Τί ἐστὶν τοῦτο?

I said to myself ... *how can this be?*

For a long time it was that way. We were asked to tell our story of how we did it. It was quite simple actually ... we simply announced who we were, who we were trying to be and become ... a community of forgiven sinners trying to be like Jesus, live out the life of the Gospel, listen to the presence of the Spirit and move into the world with love and open arms, never with wrath and judgment, always with faith.

In time we were not alone. Today there are 19 congregations and communities in our Synod which claim the title RIC. In the ELCA? ... well I printed out the congregations ... it comes to 36 pages, 12 congregations on a page.

If numbers mean anything in the Gospel Life, I'd have to say it is a start, but not a conclusion, not for the Church, not for us.

The other title I thought about for this Sermon was "The Church in the Closet" because I think a lot of the Church is still there in spite of Jesus' calling to us to come out and be loving.

It happened in the Galilee that Shabbat morning in the synagogue ... it was a *coming out* of the Good News, of God's Love. It happens here almost all the time, in our little parish. And on this Sunday, we pray ... that it happens everywhere in our church, in the churches and synagogues and mosques and faith communities everywhere ... so that we may continually and eternally say in wondrous amazement at the power of Holy Love in our midst, in our world, in all creation ...

Τί ἐστὶν τοῦτο?

+Deo Gratia
The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III
Pastor

With gratitude to Pastor Dan Hooper and Hollywood Lutheran Church, let us stand and announce our faith together using the words of "A Reconciling Creed."

**I believe that God created all that exists
and that humanity was created in God's image with a special mission to be stewards of this
good creation
and to care for one another.
In God's sight, I know that I am blessed -
a unique and precious individual -**

**and that my life has dignity and purpose.
For God so loved the world that Jesus Christ was sent to save the world, not to condemn it.
I believe that he humbled himself,
even to death upon the Cross.
He lay down his life so that I might be redeemed and my sins forgiven.
All this comes from God's goodness and
grace alone - not by my efforts.
I know that through the waters of Baptism I have been made a member of Christ's body,
and marked forever by the sign (+) of the Cross.
And for our sake, the Holy Spirit has come to us as advocate, guide, and counselor.
With the guidance of the Spirit -
as the Scriptures show -
God has called us to lives of faith,
not to earn God's favour
but in response to our redemption.
God has entrusted to us this community
his Church on earth, in which we live by one new commandment: that we love one another
as he loves us.
And we are called to carry his message
to everyone who will receive it:
God has reconciled all people for the sake of Christ, giving us peace, ending all hostility, and
creating one new humanity.
I believe my life and my place in God's household are gifts of grace,
which we all receive through faith alone.
I believe the kingdom of Christ, which is coming will have no end.
I know that in this new heaven and new earth Christ is preparing room for me.
There will be - for me and all who love him - a place at the table forever where rejoicing will
have no end. AMEN.²**

² *A Reconciling Creed* comes from Pastor Dan Hooper and Hollywood Lutheran Church, Hollywood, CA and is used in our Liturgy this morning with permission.