

Sermon "A Refreshing Change"

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28

Sunday, February 1, 2015

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

In our first scripture reading from Deuteronomy (18:15-20), Moses offers a word of hope to the Hebrew people as they prepare to enter the Promised Land of Canaan. Although Moses would not lead them, God promised to raise up a prophet from among the people to speak God's word and hold them accountable to God's message. The prophet's authority would be tested by the truth of the message. This is the Word of God.

15 The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. 16 This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." 17 Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. 19 Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. 20 But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."

Our second scripture reading is Mark 1:21-28. Although Mark is the second book in the New Testament it was the first gospel to be written. In Mark's clear and straightforward style the author states the purpose of the book in verse one: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* Our reading today describes what began as an ordinary Sabbath at a synagogue in Capernaum. Hear now the Word of God.

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and 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." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They 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." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The title of the sermon: "A Refreshing Change"

Text: *They were astounded at his teaching for he taught them as one having authority....* Mark 1:22

Let us pray: Holy God, give us ears to hear and eyes to see that we may recognize you in our midst. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

It was *a refreshing change* for those who attended synagogue on that Sabbath in Capernaum. We don't have a clue what Jesus said, what scripture he read, what illustration he used. Perhaps it wasn't the content that made his teaching so remarkable.

Perhaps Mark is getting at something bigger...he wants us to know that this was no ordinary human being who walked among them. This was not simply a gifted teacher or a wise prophet. This was not even a miracle worker in their midst. There was something different, something powerful, unique and unexplainable about Jesus of Nazareth that people who were in his presence recognized.

John, the Baptist, recognized it; the fishermen Simon, Andrew, James and John recognized it. And now, those gathered in the Capernaum synagogue were astounded at his teaching. Speechless, the congregation sat in silence. Words were inadequate to describe what they felt in the presence of Jesus.

Then the man with an unclean spirit appeared in the synagogue, saying perhaps what all the religious people were thinking, but too polite to say. *What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth?... the Holy One of God. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"*

Who among us isn't struck by Mark's choice of Jesus' first recorded miracle—healing a man with an *unclean spirit*? By choosing this encounter to introduce Jesus, Mark begins the New Testament, announcing Jesus' power over evil in the world. Make no mistake, my friends, the good news of Jesus Christ is that good wins out over evil! No matter how powerful the evil and hatred may seem in this world, God's love is stronger.

As Presbyterians we don't like to talk a lot about "good and evil" and yet it is precisely this struggle that is at the heart of our gospel. George Conway, in his book Giving Good Gifts—The Spiritual Journey of Parenting, reminds us *the greatest power evil has is the power to make us think it doesn't exist. He warns us not to psychoanalyze evil. Yes, some bad things are done by people who are sick ... but not all. Whatever the cause, there is real evil in the world. We can reassure our children that God has given us power over evil, no matter what its origin.* (pg. 142)

The biblical concept of evil evolved over time. For instance, in the Book of Job, which was written 600 years before Christ, there is no devil and Satan is not the enemy of God but more of an official accuser and a member of the heavenly council. Later, during the exile, the Israelites were influenced by the Babylonian and Persian ideas of two main gods, one good and one evil, always competing in the affairs of human beings. By the second century B.C.E. this dualistic view of the world shaped a new concept of Satan for the Hebrews, which became a personification of everything opposed to God. By the time the New Testament was written, people thought of Satan and the devil as the same—the leader of the forces of evil. *(Paraphrased from the Disciple Study Manual, pg. 108)*

Jesus would confront and rebuke all the faces of evil he encountered. Some were more easily recognizable than others. The fact that this *unclean spirit* is in the synagogue is intended to keep those of us who are religious honest about our own participation in evil.

Mark wants to be perfectly clear that it was Jesus' personal authority that was such *a refreshing change*. He knew who he was, who God called him to be and he makes no apology for it. In order for each of us to be a part of *the refreshing change* in the kingdom of God, we, too, need

to know who we are, who God calls us to be and make no apologies for it. We need the kind of *personal authority* that empowers us to do the right thing in the circumstances of our lives, to suck it up when the going gets tough because of the people we love and to speak up and say “Be silent!” to the voices in our heads and in our world that bully, belittle and threaten God’s children. Every act of generosity, compassion and mercy is a victory in the struggle of good against evil.

Jesus teaches us authoritatively and without apologies to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. As followers of Christ, much of our inner strength and personal authority comes from the conviction that evil has already been conquered on the cross. However some days, we wonder... and it is on these days when we feel overwhelmed that we pray for strength and remember the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 12—*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

This afternoon Peter and I will join Hannah, the McGills and Westminster youth at the Knox home to watch the super bowl. This is a tradition we have enjoyed over many years of ministry. One of our fondest super bowl memories was in the year 2000 when Kurt Warner threw the *Hail Mary* that won the game for the St. Louis Rams. It was truly amazing...we were all jumping and screaming and hugging each other.

A religious moment...perhaps not! A battle between good and evil...I don’t think so! Those struggles usually happen off the field in the ups and downs of our everyday life.

However, many of us were inspired by Kurt Warner’s story— the Cinderella like tale of his journey from stacking grocery shelves to Arena football...from an anonymous second-string quarter-back to NFL’s most valuable player. The most striking thing about Kurt was the story of his faith and all the ways this unpretentious man gave back to the St. Louis community...even after he was traded and moved to Phoenix. The personal authority he discovered through his faith brought him through triumphs and tragedies, happiness and heartbreak, with remarkable dignity and grace.

One of my favorite stories about the Warner family is a tradition they upheld when they traveled together... upon entering a restaurant, their children would choose a family and Kurt would anonymously pay for their dinner. *We do this* Kurt said *because it teaches our children it's not the circumstances in life that define you, but what you do in those circumstances.*

In whatever circumstance we find ourselves today, may our lives reflect the personal authority of Christ. May we be empowered to silence the voices of unclean spirits in our midst, to overcome evil by embracing the good...and through acts of generosity, compassion and mercy become a part of *a refreshing change.* Amen.