

February 1, 2015
Falcon Heights Church UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany, Year B
Deuteronomy 18:15-2-
Mark 1:21-28
Holy Communion

JESUS' NEW TEACHING

If you and I had been in the synagogue in Capernaum, at that Friday evening Sabbath worship and study time, we may have already noticed this possessed man in the crowd. And it would not be because his head was spinning, as Hollywood films would have us believe. No, it would be because we already knew him and had observed his behavior through the years. Was he mentally ill, speaking and acting strangely because of brain chemistry, and thus was hearing and seeing things that no one else did? Had he sustained a brain injury? Or did he convulse with epilepsy? But these are 21st century considerations. As 1st century people, you and I would be living in a pre-scientific culture that did not understand the medical view of how brains got mis-wired or injured, or how bodies got sick in general. We would have a sense that people could get possessed by things that just weren't right. And since the spirit world of things unseen was as natural to us as the air we breathe, we might assume this was an evil spirit. Or, we might attribute his bizarre behavior to a personal trauma or loss...one we knew about in our tight community. What we would know for sure is that this guy *did not belong among us*. He was unpredictable, a "loose cannon" who did not belong in this holy place of our synagogue, in the gathered congregation. He would be considered ritually impure and unclean. We would see his vileness, whatever it was, as first of all an affront to God and secondarily, a danger to us as a community.

As I studied this story this week, I began thinking about the limits of my own tolerance when it comes to living in community, when it comes to worshipping together. Who am I comfortable living next door to? Would I be comfortable sharing a pew with someone like this man?

Roy Oswald is a long-time minister and author who works with churches that are hoping to grow in numbers and vitality. He asks them to think about how they might be more welcoming of newcomers. He says each church has some unspoken "parish norms" when it comes to the question of "who is really welcome here?" Of course most congregations tell him: "Well, everyone is welcome here, of course!" But Oswald then invites them to do an experiment: "... Next time you are in a shopping mall," he suggests, "sit down for 10 minutes and watch people walk by. As you note specific individuals coming toward you, make a subjective judgment: Would this person receive a warm welcome in our church?" Oswald suggests that we "might be surprised at the number of people you identify as being less than welcome." (Roy Oswald, "Making Your Church More Inviting," p. 49)

Jewish purity laws of the first century dictated that people with physical or mental illnesses were not welcome in the synagogue, nor were they to commune closely with other Jews who wanted to stay ritually pure. People who were sick or appeared mentally disturbed were believed to have sinned or were possessed by evil. They not only had to deal with their problem, but they were outcast from their society. Considered unclean, unholy, and deemed separate from the rest of the community *so the community could stay holy and intact before God*. Are we in the 21st century more sophisticated than this? We might remember our nation's initial and ongoing response to people with AIDS, our discomfort around someone who is differently abled than us, or someone whose ill health is physically obvious. Without theories about germs, congenital defects, addiction and all the other things we know today about ill health, first century people looked to different causes for the problem. For the most part, they viewed sickness and deformity as caused either by personal sin, or by an evil spirit or demon who had taken up residence in your body.

Into this mix of cultural assumptions and religious traditions appears Jesus. Throughout his public ministry, it will be his custom to read the Hebrew scriptures and speak in local synagogues, which was not unusual for itinerant teachers at the time. But his manner of speaking, and his interaction with the disruptive man with an "evil spirit," so astounds the other worshippers that a new type of teaching and teacher will emerge. Strangely, it is the unclean spirit who recognizes Jesus for who he is: "What have you to do with us; have you come to destroy us?" (I.e., me and all the other unclean spirits.) For those steeped in the Jewish tradition, it was well known that when the Kingdom of God comes upon earth, evil will be confronted and overpowered. "I know who you are," continues the unclean spirit, "the Holy One of God!"

Exorcists and healers were common in the first century, but they used magical incantations and elaborate rituals to confront spiritual evil. Jesus simply bellows, "Muzzle yourself, and come out of him!" Everyone is amazed, meaning literally that they did not comprehend what they had experienced. Apparently, it is Jesus' words themselves that bring in God's reign of power over evil. Not only that, but in a society that dehumanized sick and possessed people, this man is now being restored to his community. Interesting question: Which is more disruptive and shocking *to us*? Someone gets healed, or are we more surprised by that some marginalized and scorned outsider being *brought back into community*? I wonder....who has been marginalized and scorned among us in our families, in our workplaces, in our congregation, who might need to be welcomed back?

All this can be unsettling. "What is this?" those assembled in the synagogue cry out. "A new teaching – with authority!" Which is odd, because this isn't new; this is old stuff. The Hebrew prophets have told the community again and again that God's "new thing" will "erupt out of old tradition and expectation." (Kate Huey, UCC lectionary Web page for Epiphany 4B.) But the first century

scribes drew their authority from their erudite command of language and their knowledge of different rabbinic scholars' commentaries about different texts. In this scene, Jesus' authority has a brash, independent streak. It also calls people back to the essence of their tradition. Jesus' action reminded people of God their Creator, the One who *spoke* into the void and *made* the universe. When Jesus speaks, something happens! And, that something, in Jesus' case, is usually going to be disruptive to the status quo.

Where do we experience this kind of authority today? Our Deuteronomy passage tells of how God will raise up prophetic voices that will challenge people with God's justice and mercy. And prophets' voices throughout Israel's history continually disrupted the complacency and evil deeds of both leaders and the Jewish community. The prophets' message was consistent: You are mistreating the poor; you are worshipping idols; you are not embodying God's ways of love and compassion; you have left God. We might wonder together, whom does God speak through today? Perhaps a better way to ask this question is: Who speaks, and in speaking seems to disrupt the status quo? Prophetic voices in our distant past in our nation called for the abolition of slavery; they were perceived as disrupting God-assigned roles of master and slave. Today, prophetic voices in both government and many faith communities call us to affirm marriage equality for straight and gay people alike, to re-examine our approach to immigration, to face up to the scientific facts of climate change and environmental degradation. And some people still find these ideas disruptive to all they hold dear.

We will be reading through the Gospel of Mark from now until the end of November. We will encounter repeated instances of Jesus' prophetic teaching and healing. His words and being will restore people not only to physical and mental wholeness, but he will also be restoring them to community. And these actions will be perceived as a wondrously miraculous by some, and as tremendously disruptive and problematic by others.

I suggest we pay close attention to Jesus' new and, yes, disruptive, teaching at this point in our interim period together. As you can read in today's bulletin, the Discovery Team is asking you to join them next Sunday morning for an honest look at some of your history together. To speak openly about both joys and disappointments in your experience here may sound potentially disruptive. Yet I have found that such openhearted sharing, in a small group where there is no debate or discussion about other people's experiences, can begin to disrupt negative interactions in a congregation. As we give our presence and attention to one another, we begin to rebuild trust and hope in our life together as the Church. I hope you will join us next Sunday, as all voices need to be heard.

We will need to re-immers ourselves in Jesus' "new teaching" in the days ahead. It is guaranteed to both disrupt and to guide us. I am grateful for, and I am dependent on, Jesus' living presence among us in this process. Together, may we be instructed, disrupted and comforted by his loving authority. Amen.