

Sermon: Epiphany IV

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 1, 2015

Year B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

When I lived in Greenville, Ohio... there was an annual Annie Oakley Festival... Annie was born in that county... and she came to be known as Darke County's most famous daughter... and they capitalized on her fame...

One year... as part of the festival... descendants of local Native American tribes were going to perform a dance... a sacred dance... and so they needed to prepare the space... much as bishops consecrate a church... and this process took about thirty minutes... well... about twenty-five minutes into it... someone's dog ran across the circle... a profane dog in a sacred circle... and they had to start all over again...

When I served a church in Pittsburgh a few years ago... the building was used by many groups... and in looking at the calendar one day... I realized that the building was over booked one night the next week... and the only available space was in the sacristy... there was enough room for about a dozen chairs... and so I pencilled in... that the women's group would meet there...

A day or so later... I got a call from one of the church members... who had seen that changed room assignment... and was quite alarmed that I would allow a group to meet in "sacred space"... this person believed there was a boundary which ought not be crossed... for me... there was also an element of hospitality that I wanted to honor... we talked about it for a while... and agreed that we would continue to respect space that was "set aside" in some way... but that we would also not be any less hospitable than we'd been...

And I believe that it is important... to respect space that's been prepared for things that are set apart... like the Holocaust Museum... and this space... but we don't do it so much because the space appreciates it... but because of the change it creates in us...

In today's Epistle... Paul writes about food sacrificed to idols... he says that since we know no idol really exists... we are *no worse off* if we don't eat what is offered to them... and *no better off* if we do... but he cautions those who know this... to not lord it over those who don't... and inadvertently become a stumbling block to them... I hope I didn't become a stumbling block to the woman who called me... but Paul's caution was grounded in love... and it sheds light on the idea... that even though one may be theologically correct... love must still trump knowledge... otherwise all knowledge does... as he says in v. 1... is puff one up... this is comparable to the idea... of insisting on our right to free speech... even when others are offended...

And woven into Paul's caution... is the issue of the sacred and the profane... what to eat and what to avoid... Jesus responded specifically to this in Matthew 15:11... when he said it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person... but what comes out of it...

Let's remember... the Biblical world was dominated... and I don't want to minimize this... by ideas about what was sacred and what was profane... by ideas of uncleanness and ritual purity... by those things which would defile... like coming into contact with a dead body or an unclean spirit... and that which would purify and maintain holiness... like ritual baths or making an offering... Leviticus is full of such rules and practices... even the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple... forty days after his birth... corresponds to the Purification of his mother Mary... as prescribed in Leviticus 12:2-8...

We still function these days with ideas of clean and dirty... though we are not as constrained as our ancestors were... we know more about infection control... we wash

our fruits and vegetables... don't eat raw eggs... wash our hands before we eat... we cover our mouths when we cough... moms tell their kids not to get dirty when they go out to play... but we don't ask our houseguests when they were last made ritually pure... we may clean our homes... we may have our homes blessed... but we don't think about turning them into sacred spaces...

But in today's Gospel... Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath... a sacred place at a sacred time... and the presence of a man possessed by a demon violates the space... and could make one impure... the scribes would caution: **stay clear**...

Fr. John Shea writes: the demon possessing this man... is familiar with these purity laws... and is banking on Jesus leaving him alone... lest Jesus risk defilement... but Jesus taught with more authority than the scribes... when the demon says: *have you come to destroy us*... Shea suggests this also means: *are you seriously considering polluting yourself*... *do you think you can destroy us without being drawn into our uncleanness*... and in recognizing Jesus as the Holy One of God... the demon is even more certain that someone who prizes holiness... as Jesus certainly must... will have the theological good sense to stay away...

Evil expects that we will respond with fear... that we will stay clear... that we will let it have it's way... and hope for the best... or be glad later that things didn't turn out any worse than they did... what evil doesn't expect... is that we face it... say: *be gone*... *you have no power here*... what evil doesn't expect... is that God in Christ will not allow it to maintain its vicious domination of God's good creation...

Shea writes: the people are amazed... because they have seen another way to deal with the fear of impurity... don't avoid it... bring your own... stronger purity to it... and cleanse it...

And I've believed for a long time... that when you do nothing to stop the playground bully... wherever he or she may be... all you're really doing is enabling them to continue being a bully... they become the demon... expecting you to leave them alone... and not get your hands dirty... but when you confront them... when you set a limit or a boundary... when you let them know where you stand... they may not like it... they may come out convulsing and screaming... but they're forced to respond differently... that's part of why we need boundaries... why we need to set limits... but we need our boundaries to be permeable and reasonable too... that's part of why it was OK for the women's group to meet in the sacristy...

I can't offer a statistic... but because most Christians are modern scientific people... because we know about bacteria... and viruses... and mental illness... most of us have pretty much dismissed the notion of actual demons... have demoted Satan to the man behind the curtain... to whom we're not supposed to pay any attention... but there is evil in the world... it's more subtle and cunning than a man with horns and a tail... it expresses itself in greed at the expense of the environment... it expresses itself in keeping secrets at the expense of emotional health... it expresses itself in the debasement of human life that we see around the world...

But I once heard someone say... that when evil knows it has lost the battle... it thrashes about even more wildly... trying to latch onto something... hold on to anything it can... to keep its balance... but at that point... its failure is assured... and even though the world seems to be more out of control than ever been... I believe it's because evil is losing the fight...

For the last few weeks... we've been giving thanks for the Word made flesh... and it is Jesus' words themselves that effect change... that touch something far more subtle than we can perceive... and create healing... we may be tempted to think that this exorcism is about Jesus' power... like magic power... but the Greek word for authority is

different from the word for power... and his authority is an eagerness... maybe even a right... to ensure that justice is served... this is what Jesus' ministry is all about...

And if we are to follow this Jesus... this is the work to which we are called... it's not about just having more information... it's not... as I said last week... about giving us just one more thing to do... but is about being transformed... about speaking truth to power... and speaking with the same kind of authority too... Holy God... make it so...

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