

*Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
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*The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany B ~ January 31, 2021
Deuteronomy 18:15-2, Psalm 111, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: Amen

How often, in the last ten months, have we heard, or heard of people claiming that their freedom, their individual liberty, was being restricted by orders to wear a mask? Of course, the orders were designed to use one of the few means we have had to control the spread of COVID-19, and they were issued for the purpose of protecting as many people as possible. But people in this country, who prize individual liberty above the common good, didn't wish to hear about it.

The well-being of the community is what is behind the lesson from 1 Corinthians we've heard this morning. It may be hard for us to get our heads around eating food sacrificed to idols. But the intent of Paul's instruction to the Corinthians, which made sense in their time and culture, was a way of saying that those who had a stronger faith and could eat such food without thinking that they were being untrue to the Triune God, should refrain from doing so in the presence of those who would be confused or misled because of their lack of understanding. What can be a liberating force for some people can destroy others (1 Cor 8:11).

I think it is not a stretch to analogize this lesson to a contemporary experience: those of us who are stronger in body are to wear masks when we're around others and keep our distance to protect the members of our society who are weaker, more physically compromised, and therefore, more likely to become infected with the virus. If he were with us, I doubt that Paul would be interested in appeals to individual rights when the well-being of others is at stake: "take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak" he told his flock in Corinth (1 Cor. 8:9).

The good of the community is a theme that runs through the lessons today. It was for the good of the Israelites as a community that God would call another prophet like Moses after his work was done. They complained, "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire I will die." (Deut.18:16.) But they needed to hear God's voice to get to the promised land, so one of them would be called as the intermediary with God to reach their destination. This past

November, many people in this country felt that we needed a different leader because the previous one could no longer be trusted with the control he had. So, for the good of the country – we hope—the former’s dreams were quashed and there is the possibility that a new approach will take control of the country’s assets in order to, at least slow down the spread of COVID.

Like the frightening possibility of the spread of the unclean spirit in the synagogue in the Gospel text, we have been dealing with the spread of the unclean virus, not only in this country, but throughout the world. Millions of people have been slowed down, or stopped in our regular lives, and still the evil continues to reach new people and to render them ill, or to take their lives completely.

We can see how frightening the contest between Jesus and the unclean spirit must have been for the people gathered for the sabbath worship. We might ask, “What was such a being doing in the sacred space of the synagogue? How did it get in there? Was it in the man when he entered the synagogue without anyone (maybe even the man) noticing?”

Was it Jesus’ teaching “with authority” that propelled the ugly, evil response from the demons? The Greek word that’s translated as “authority,” is *exousian*, “and it means a power that goes out or emanates from someone.” (Yáñez, Raúl Méndez, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/comentario-del-san-marcos-121-28-4_translation_mine.) So maybe it was the power of Jesus’ teaching, unlike that of the scribes (the traditional teachers of the law), that excited the unclean spirit. In fact, one commentator suggests that the demons’ question, “Have you come to destroy us?” expresses the opinion of the scribes about Jesus. Myers, Ched, *Binding the Strong Man*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1995), 142.

This meeting in the synagogue in Capernaum is the first occurrence in Jesus’ public ministry in Mark’s Gospel. Before that, Jesus had called his first disciples in Galilee (which we focused on last week; 1:14-20), and before that – at the very beginning of the Gospel – he came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John (1:1-11). Immediately after that, upon Jesus having been possessed with the Holy Spirit, he was driven into the wilderness for his forty-day temptation (1:12-13.) . Then he moved on to Galilee to call his first disciples.

We have, in essence, a struggle between the Holy Spirit within Jesus and the unclean spirit lurking in a man – a worshiper? – that is acted out before the people

of Capernaum. And for the benefit of the community, to be rid of the unclean spirit, Jesus confronts it and expels it.

Unlike the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in John's Gospel, when Jesus turned gallons and gallons of water into wine to increase the celebration at the wedding in Cana, here Jesus heals only one person. But the benefit of that single healing is felt by the whole community, because "[a]t once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee" (1:28) and that fame brought more and more people to him, to hear the good news, to be saved, and to be healed.

So, how can we make a difference in our world, if we do not have the authority with which Jesus taught, and if we don't know how to cast out unclean spirits or even find a way to overcome the evil of COVID-19? Well, we can do it one act at a time, phone call by phone call, card or note by card or note, donation by donation. This reminds me of a story I heard some time ago – it may be factual, or not.

A man was vacationing in Puerto Vallarta. He was walking along the beach when he noticed that there were hundreds of starfish stranded on the sand. In the distance he saw a lone man, bending down, standing up and throwing something into the water. Then he repeated his action, bent down, stood up and threw something into the water. As the vacationer got closer, he could see that the man was throwing starfish into the water, over and over again.

As the vacationer got close to the man, he called out, "Why are you doing that?" The man turned to him and said, "Because they have to be in the water in order to survive.

"But there are hundreds, thousands, of them. You'll never make a difference."

The man replied, as he threw one more starfish into the water, "I've just made all the difference in the world to that one."

So too for us, my friends. We may not think that we're making a big difference in the world, but to each life we touch, we can make all the difference in the world.

Jesus' expulsion of the unclean spirit is a cleansing of a different sort from the kind that we so often experience in our time and country. Think of the aisles and aisles of products you can find in your favorite store to clean and perfume every part of your body and to clean and deodorize every corner of your house. It seems that we

are obsessed with cleanliness in the United States, but not always spiritually. Today, we can consider how best to focus our spiritual lives – both individually and in community – on surviving the pandemic so that we are more able to walk in Jesus' way.

In response to the gift of that focus which Jesus makes to us, we can sing with the psalmist, "Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation. ... The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who practice this have a good understanding. God's praise endures forever. (Ps. 111:1, 10.)

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen