

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 28, 2024

The common theme of our weekend readings is Divine authority as exercised by the prophets of the Old Testament in their messages, by the apostles in their writings and teaching in the New Testament, and by Jesus in his teaching and healing ministry.

Our first reading of today tells us that a true prophet speaks with authority because it is God who speaks through him. In the second reading, St. Paul exercises his God-given authority as the Apostle to the Gentiles to teach people that marriage is a holy state ordained by God and that it is a life-long partnership according to the teaching of the Lord. In today's Gospel, St. Mark describes one sample Sabbath day of Jesus' public life. Jesus joins in public worship in the synagogue as a practicing Jew. He heals the sick, he drives out evil spirits and prays privately.

Since any Rabbi could be invited to explain the Holy Scripture in synagogue worship, Jesus who was seen as a Rabbi was invited. People immediately noticed that Jesus spoke with authority and healed with Divine power. The Old Testament prophets had taught using God's delegated authority, and the scribes and Pharisees taught quoting Moses, the prophets, and the great rabbis. But Jesus as we saw today, taught using his own authority and knowledge as God to teach, empower, liberate, and heal others.

My dear friends, every time I read a story such as the one we just heard, it gives me hope. And the reason is simple, there are all sorts of things in me that aren't healthy and holy and life-giving. It's not easy to say that out loud, but it is the truth. I am a sinner. I carry grudges. I say the wrong thing. I do the wrong thing. I harbor petty and prejudicial attitudes. I judge when I shouldn't. I act out of self-interest and not always with the well-being of others in mind. I could go on and on. Maybe you feel exactly the same way. Put simply, there can be, at times, a kind of ugliness within me, a lack of generosity of heart, a spirit of, "Me first." In

other words, I'm kind of "broken". And I don't like it. I wish those things could be taken away, removed and made powerless.

And then I hear the Scripture story we just heard, a story about a man being tormented by something or someone, a man in the grips of something he seemed to have no power or control over. And Jesus makes it all better. Our loving God steps in and restores the man to health, to wholeness, to a life free from forces that seek to drag him down a dangerous and an unholy path. Jesus doesn't ignore the man, nor flee from him, but rather has an encounter with him and the man's life is changed forever.

And that gives me hope, because in many ways, I am that man. Maybe you can see yourselves in him too. And so my heart is grateful, grateful for a God who wants nothing more than to reach out to us and "fix" whatever is broken, heal whatever is wounded, remove whatever is getting in the way of us being the best people, the best versions of ourselves. That's why I love stories such as these, because I know that I can't make it through life alone and this shows that I don't have to.

Yes, I can see myself in the man in the story. But is that the only "part" I could play? Is that the only person I should identify with?

One of the challenges of Christianity (maybe the greatest challenge) is truly believing that we are called to live lives in imitation of Jesus. Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate "consequence" of a lifetime of showing us precisely what it means to be a holy, faithful, God-centered human being, a person "fully-alive". As St. John Neumann is quoted to have said that the glory of God is human being fully alive. Jesus came to save us, that much is absolutely true but he also came to show us how to live, how to think, how to see, how to act, that is, how to love. And it was his refusal to do anything BUT love that led him to the cross, a love so strong that it even rendered death powerless. Death has no power in the face of perfect love.

And while we will never love as perfectly as Jesus, because of our limitations, we are nevertheless called to strive for precisely that, to try to do the right thing by every person in every situation. God wants nothing less from us, nothing less than our all, nothing less than our complete selves. Jesus gave that sort of faithfulness to his Father and the consequence was a “miracle” of the highest order - the salvation of the entire world.

If we tried to love in the same way, what might we help bring about? What difference might we make? And do we even want to find out?

All of this means that we can't just see ourselves as the man tormented by the demon in today's story, but we must also be able to see ourselves as Jesus, as the one reaching out to a person in pain, reaching out in love, helping the man be free of all that is keeping him bound. We can't simply say, “That's God's problem!” You see, in faith, we believe that God's “problems” (if I can use that sort of language) are OUR problems. And not because it has to be that way, but because God seems to want it that way, God wants us to share in his mission, share in his goodness, share in his very life. And we do that by loving. It's as “simple” as that.

More often than not we spend most of our lives in our little comfort zones. We foster friendships with people who are just like us. We hang around people who think like us, dress like us, pray like us, and look like us. We watch news we agree with, and visit websites that affirm what we already believe. We divide everything into boxes and categories and by “everything” I mean people - people “in” our group, and people “outside” of it.

Jesus did no such thing. In fact, time after time, he did the precise opposite. And so, who is that person in your life that seems to be really broken and hurting and in need of healing? Who is that person you know whom everybody runs from or avoids? Who is that man or woman you see day after day who has few friends, few people he or she can count on? Who do you know is being possessed by loneliness or fear or despair

or grief? Who needs you to reach out to them, not to ignore them, but to see them?

My dear friends, the problems of this world can seem daunting at times. That much is absolutely true. And yet, in the end, it's not complicated. It comes down to one person wanting to help one person, one person simply being willing to love another.

Will I be that person? Will I be that person reaching out in love? Will you?