

Where All Are Worthy

by

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Mark 1:21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

²⁷They 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.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This passage of scripture is about what happens when Jesus enters a place of worship, the synagogue or a sanctuary, if you will. The story reveals his God-given authority and it describes how Jesus challenges customs regarding who is welcome and who is not when folks gather to attend the word of God.

Now, it has been a long time since we were gathered together in this sanctuary. My pastoral colleagues and I, along with our musicians Jeff and Edward, have done everything we can to try to bridge the space between us during this season of virtual worship. While a lot of other churches have broadcast sermons from the living room of the preacher, and singers have recorded their individual parts alone to create a virtual choir, we at Bryn Mawr, have been privileged to beam worship from within this sacred space. We have placed a high value on our viewers being able to access our sanctuary, even if only through a screen. All of which has caused me, over these ten months of shut-down, to ponder the meaning of sacred space.

Sacred is derived from the word “holy” and means dedicated to God, consecrated for religious purposes, sanctified and revered as opposed to secular. We all know that when we enter this sanctuary we can sense its sacred nature – with light shining through magnificent stained glass windows telling the story of Jesus; the vaulted ceiling raising our spirits toward the heavens; the cross in the front; the Trinitarian circles in the chandeliers; the gilded books of the Bible on the beams above us – all signs and symbols that this space is holy. Pre-pandemic we might have considered it a refuge, an invitation to be reflective, quiet and contemplative, a shelter from the storm outside.

There was a time, and there still is a notion a lot of people hold dear that some things do not belong in our sacred spaces, we dress up when we enter in and can look askance at the visitor in blue jeans. Many think the preacher should leave politics at the door and talk only of spiritual things; that matters of faith should focus internally, address personal morality, and not intersect so much with public welfare.

The synagogue in Capernaum was such a place of religious assembly and teaching, with long standing divisions between what is appropriate inside and what happens outside. There were strict rules about who could come in and who could not; about what happened on the Sabbath and what should not. On the Sabbath inside the synagogue a selection of the Torah was read and interpreted by a scribe. The Pharisees had strict control over what was taught about God and the law. If they disagreed with a religious teaching, they could throw the interpreter out on his ear.

So when Jesus and his disciples *went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.* Then Jesus showed them his authority by engaging in a loud and complex struggle with an unclean spirit. He healed a man possessed by a host of demons. And in so doing, he might as well have knocked down the columns of the synagogue and let it implode. You see – Jesus was completely redefining sacred space.

Our text from Mark's gospel shows that Jesus' understanding of sacred space is broader, and deeper than we imagine. It is more expansive than we might even want. If you want to understand who God is then we need to make room, even in our worship, for the fierce struggle between the power of God and whatever represents the anti-God; between the power of good and the power of evil; between the long held traditions of what is allowed in the sanctuary and what is unwelcomed. In a word, our worship is in vain and our faith is empty of meaning if we do not engage the power of God with the demonic forces of human sin and evil, of illness, suffering, and anything that eats away at the life God intends for God's children. You see, in this text, and in our time, it is not our technological ability to finesse the distance between you wherever you are and us who lead worship here in the sanctuary. It is what Jesus does that upends the divide between what is sacred and what is not. In the person of Jesus, there is no strict separation between worship and world.

Some of you may have seen the lovely picture of Salisbury Cathedral in the UK set up as a site for the COVID-19 vaccine distribution. During my Sabbatical two years ago, I spent three days in Salisbury and countless hours in that cathedral. Unusual in the history of European cathedrals, rather than being constructed and added onto over hundreds of years, the Salisbury Cathedral was built in the span of one generation, in only thirty-eight years in the mid-thirteenth century. It has a gorgeous symmetry to it, the tallest spire in England. It holds the oldest working mechanical clock in the world, and the best preserved of only four surviving copies of the Magna Carta. And now, people from around the English countryside are lining up, socially distanced in the sanctuary to receive the coronavirus vaccine while the organists play in the background, as one has said, in one of the only live music venues in the current shutdown. ¹

You could say that the Salisbury Cathedral has become the kind of sacred space that Jesus intends, where there is no discernable distinction between the power of God engaging the powers of the world. Because according to Jesus, everything is allowed in sacred space – illness, demon possession, human sin and even the evil of the world – because the authority and the power of God are here – are there to take them on. The authority and power of God are wherever we are, to take them on. Jesus himself expands our sacred space, because in his realm – all are worthy and welcomed into worship.

Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, where I was ordained and began my ministry, sits directly across the street from the Georgia State Capital. Because of our downtown location the church housed a number of outreach ministries serving the homeless and the urban poor. We had a winter Night Shelter for seventy-five homeless men, a food pantry, a medical clinic, and a counseling center. In those days our doors were always open to anyone who would enter in off the streets.

¹ “An Organ Recital with a Coronavirus Shot,” *New York Times*, 1/25/21.

One Sunday morning we had invited the distinguished Old Testament Professor from Columbia Seminary, Walter Brueggemann to preach. During his sermon, a homeless guest wandered in and walked down the aisle of the sanctuary. He was disheveled, carrying a large paper cup and sipping out of a straw. When he was not sipping he was talking loudly, out of his mind. The pastors and ushers were always prepared for such an intrusion in worship, but because we had a guest preacher, everyone was on the edge of their seats wondering what would happen. I have no idea what Walter's sermon was about that day, but I will never forget how he handled this man with apparent mental illness. Walter invited him to have a seat. He told him we would all be glad to listen to him, when his sermon was over, but he was talking about the Bible and had a few more things to say. The man calmed down; he sat on the front pew. And then Walter Brueggemann looked up at the congregation and said – in this world we all hear many voices. Many voices competing for our attention. And we have to decide which voice to listen to.

Friends, in our world we have many voices competing for our attention. What the voice of Jesus is telling us today is that all are worthy in the presence of God and there is a particular place of welcome for the ill, the suffering, the struggling, the stressed, anyone possessed by demons and needing to be healed. Indeed, our worship would not be sacred space without them.

AMEN.