

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

Epiphany 4B
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Love Matters More

Walking into the ancient fishing village of Capernaum feels like walking right into the gospel stories that happened there. Looking out from the town square over the Sea of Galilee, it's easy to imagine Jesus calling the disciples away from their nets and their boats, calling them into a new life with him. Walking through the town, I can almost see Matthew's tax collecting booth on the side of the dusty main road, nestled among the ancient ruins. Seeing Peter's home in the distance, I imagine Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law and the awe and wonder that healing must have aroused in her. And the synagogue, the site of today's gospel story is a place you can see and touch and experience for yourself. The synagogue is only partially excavated, because another synagogue was built on top of it in the fourth century, but that doesn't matter. Holy ground is holy ground. The synagogue sits just inland from the Sea of Galilee, its portico facing Jerusalem. This is the place Jesus began his public ministry according to Mark's gospel. This is the place Jesus first amazed the people with his authoritative preaching, the place he cast out a demon who knew exactly who he was. When you stand on holy ground like that, the holy stories can't help but come alive.

Our former bishop insisted that everyone ordained a priest in his diocese, travel to the Holy Land, preferably with him as their guide. Bishop Rickel believed that being in the places Jesus walked and taught and healed and preached, would have a profound impact on our ministries in general, and on our preaching in particular. He was right. Scripture can be hard to understand and even harder to relate to. So to be able to contextualize the scriptures, to stand among the ruins from the time they were written, to glimpse the social context into which they were written, to begin to understand what the scriptures meant for the people they were written for... these experiences open windows for us and help us to explore what in the world such stories have to do with us.

Capernaum sits on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee, a little seaside town that was home to perhaps 1,500 people, and home base for much of Jesus' ministry. Many healings, miracles, teachings and callings happened in Capernaum, but all of that came later. What we hear today is the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Can you imagine it? There in the synagogue Jesus was preaching and teaching- likely for the first time- and everyone in the place was completely and totally riveted, hanging on his every word.

His authority had to have been palpable – an authority utterly unlike that of the scribes and the Pharisees. It wasn't just different because it wasn't legalistic, it was different because his authority came from God and was focused on God. Jesus wasn't expounding on right and wrong, purity and impurity, or even his knowledge of God. Jesus' authority came not from his knowledge, but from his relationship with the Father. It was the only kind of authority he ever claimed, and that authority was captivating. Then suddenly, into a stillness so deep he heard a voice cry 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.” Jesus looked right into the eyes of that unclean man with the unclean spirit, and simply said “Be silent. Come out of him.” That was it. But in that moment, for that man, and for every other person in the room, the whole world changed.

It’s a strange story, isn’t it? Outside of a few creepy movies, exorcism is not something we typically encounter. We can’t know what was really wrong with the man – whether he was demon possessed or mentally ill or maybe having an epileptic seizure. But none of that matters, really. What matters is that God in Christ Jesus looked into the eyes and heart of a broken man and healed him. And when he did that, Jesus did something unimaginable. In his very first public act of ministry, Jesus broke the purity code by crossing the border between clean and unclean.

The scripture says this was a man with an unclean spirit. Not a man with a demon. A man with an unclean spirit. While this might mean little to us, for the people in Jesus’ world, cleanliness and ritual purity were profoundly important. Much of ancient Hebrew Law centered around such things. People were very serious about maintaining literal and ritual purity, so much so that some of the biggest arguments Jesus and the Pharisees had were about ritual cleanliness – when do we wash, how do we wash, what do we wash? When do we eat, how do we eat, what do we eat, with whom do we eat? And while I believe Jesus cared about these things – remember he said he came to fulfill the law, not to abolish it – what I think he cared about more was what happened to people’s relationships, what happened to the community, when they weren’t careful about how much power they gave the rules. You see, when rules hold so much power, only the people who make the rules – the insiders, the old-timers, the ones in-the-know – have access to power. And that sort of power, power that comes from knowledge and certainty, and not from love, is divisive. It separates us from one another.

When Jesus stopped his “teaching with authority” to engage a man with an unclean spirit, he crossed a boundary that no one, particularly no Holy One of his day would have crossed. When Jesus crossed that boundary from clean to unclean, he showed us that God will go into the messiest, nastiest, ugliest places in the whole wide world, to reclaim the least and last of us and make us whole.

“[And] they kept on asking each other, what is this? A new teaching [?]...” A new teaching indeed. What Jesus was teaching that day is that God’s love is boundless – it observes no boundaries and there is no place it won’t go. Right from the very beginning, Jesus made clear the reality that even the strongest social barriers have no place and no power in God’s world.

It’s what Paul was talking about, too. On the face of it Paul seems to be talking about whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and just like the exorcism Jesus performed, that’s hard for us to make sense of. So let’s go back again, this time to the ancient town of Corinth, a thriving seaport with a significant population of highly-educated, relatively wealthy, urbane people, some of whom were learning the way to follow Jesus. Now can we relate? These erudite and elegant folks spent a lot of time entertaining, and so naturally, they frequently visited the local food markets, which were, for the most part, connected to various temples built to various gods. The reason the markets were connected to the temples in those days is because they sold meat. And in order to have meat, animals had to be slaughtered. In ancient time that happened ritually, and always in a spirit of sacrifice to some god or another. After the priest sacrificed the animal and made an

offering, the rest of the meat went to the market to be sold. If you wanted to serve meat at your dinner party, it had to have been meat that was initially sacrificed to idols. But when your social status revolves around entertaining, serving the best is what matters, regardless of where it came from.

Many of the Corinthians who had begun to follow the way of Jesus Christ, didn't feel the need to give up their beautifully butchered meat, even when they were criticized by the ones who thought they should. "There are no such things as false gods," they said, "there is only the one God. And because there is only One God, all that sacrificing to idols is irrelevant." They knew what they knew, and they looked rather pitifully on the ill-informed people who thought eating meat sacrificed to idols might be a bad thing. It was a poor assumption to make, according to the apostle Paul. We ask different questions today, but the issue is the same. While all the people agreed there was only one God, those people had some very different ideas about what that one God was asking of them. Some didn't care about the idol meat. Other people were profoundly disturbed by it. Who was right? Well, that's not really a good question.

If being right means I am keeping someone from taking seriously my commitment to Jesus Christ, then being right needs to be set aside. If being right means the people who actually need to hear me cannot bear to listen to me, then being right needs to be set aside. It's tricky because we really do want to "do the right thing." But I think what Paul is saying is that we need to be more concerned with the impact of our words and actions on others than with being right. Being smart, being right, being "in-the-know" is great when you're an insider. But it's terrible when you're not. Being right is divisive.

Paul was more concerned about the community than he was about the rules. It wasn't that the rules didn't matter, they did. But they needed to be viewed in a way that connects rather than divides, and that happens by privileging relationship over rule. I think a what Paul was saying to the Corinthians, and to us, is that even the people who are truly committed to following Jesus Christ have different ideas about how best to do that. And perhaps more important than that, people who don't yet know the way to Jesus will never be able to find their way if their curiosity and questions and uncertainties and ideas are not welcome. If we call people who see things differently than we do ignorant or ill-informed or stupid or wrong, we will never be able to show them Jesus.

...all of us possess knowledge, Paul tells us. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Knowledge without love is not only insufficient, it can actually be destructive. When insiders claim knowledge of what is right and wrong without necessarily considering the reality that someone not in-the-know may have great insights, fresh ideas, new vision, or deeper understanding, we are all impoverished. It can be a hard thing to realize that being inclusive will always mean we don't get to have everything the way we want it. And still, that's what it means. Relationships matter more than results, and the way we get from A-Z with one another is more important than getting to Z.

Being a Christian, following the way of Jesus of Nazareth means living a life that is grounded in love. So whether we're talking about things as small as folding the laundry or as big as our belief in God – being right doesn't matter. Even, or perhaps especially when we are right. It's simple, really. Love matters more. Love matters more. Amen