

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 ~ Mark 1:21-28

Getting Down to Business

4th Sunday after Epiphany ~ Annual Meeting of the Congregation ~ January 28, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture Reading

First day on the job. We've all had them, yes? Our gospel story today is about Rabbi Prophet Savior Jesus getting down to business on Day 1 of his Messiah job. He shows up on time at his place of work or the office aka: the synagogue, on church day, the sabbath. Especially here, in the Gospel of Mark, there is no beating around the bush. Mark doesn't just parachute us, he sky-dives us right into the heart of our story. And even in this short story, only seven verses long, sets the tone for the arc of the entire gospel leading to the cross and beyond.

This story of Jesus, our story, is a good one. Probably a better story than the ones you've been hearing all week. This story of Jesus is different. It has the power to change our hearts and minds and enlighten our imaginations. This story is *not* about how much stuff we should try to acquire in order to be successful; *nor* is it another story that frames our life as if we are in life-and-death competition with each other. Neither of those two story lines would give us any reason to be here worshipping today, engaging with joy in the hard work of collaboration and restorative justice.

The story of Jesus' short life on earth is very good news. It takes us beyond the world of rock, paper, scissors types of power games. The story of Jesus' short life on earth reveals epiphanies where we can glimpse a still, more excellent way. We might wish our story, this Bible, was easier to understand. Yet I think we are here today, ready to hear this story again or for this first time, because we want to believe in a deep way that life is good. We want to believe that God is good, and humanity is good. As Richard Rohr reminds us: when we believe our storyline is going somewhere good, we can do exciting and imaginative things. We will get to some of those exciting and imaginative things that God has been doing here at FPC in 2023 right after worship when we have our Annual Meeting. Right now, I invite you now to hear the story of Jesus and the story of us, in this reading of Mark 1:21-28.

Sermon

What is our business here at church? I was amused by a wedding invitation our thirtysomething daughter Emily and her husband Matt, have attached to their refrigerator door under a magnet. The invitation says on the cover "Getting Down to Business" meaning, they were "getting married." Yes, the day these two people would make their vows publicly, sign legal documents, and transform their love and commitment to one another into an institution we call "marriage." That was the day they were "getting down to business."

What about this thing we call church? What is *our* business that we need to get down to? Or up to? It also has something to do with love, yes? God who so loved this world enough to actually become one of us. That is our story. God's love for all creation, made known to us in

Christ Jesus, isn't that what calls into being this institution we call church? Or maybe it's the free coffee.

Seriously, on this Annual Meeting Day that only comes around once a year, what would you say if someone asked you, "What is your business" there at church? If you're getting a little jumpy in your seat right now, you can probably see where this is going. Yes, I'm going to ask you to turn to a person worshipping near you, and give them your answer to this question: "What is our business here at church?"

I wish I could have heard everyone's answers! I bet there were as many different responses as there are people in this room and online. Yes, we have our FPC mission statement. Yes, we are a Matthew 25 church. Yes, as Presbyterians, we have our *Book of Order* description of our business, which is God's mission. A phrase made memorable by "The Blues Brothers," in the iconic 1980 movie, as they drove along in their muscle car saying, "Me and the Lord, we've got an understanding....We're on a mission from God!"

Yes, our mission, as our Presbyterian Book of Order (Book Two of our Constitution) puts it, *comes from Christ*: who "announces the nearness of God's kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord's favor upon all creation." *The church's life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ's ongoing life and work.* " ... to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down... pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord."ⁱ

That's pretty much what you said, right? That is what we are *trying* to do here at FPC. To be a bridge, an oasis, a safe place of welcome and wonder. A community where we do justice and joy. A community where we can ask hard questions. And where we can dream with God. Big dreams and local action. We ask what we can do right here in Marshfield to be agents of healing in our world of brokenness. Why is this our business, our mission? Because this is the story of Jesus. And it is our story, too.

Here in Mark's gospel, the first of our four gospels to be written down, Jesus starts showing and telling his mission from Day 1 on the job. We can see him laying down his markers here in the synagogue on the sabbath. Did you notice how it is the "unclean spirit" in the man is the first one to immediately recognize Jesus for who he is? "I know who you are: The Holy One of God." This term comes from 1 Kings when a woman recognizes Elisha to be a true prophet. And that evil spirit seeing Jesus, knows it is overmatched by the Holy One.

It might help you to know that Mark uses the terms we translate as "unclean spirit, evil spirit, and demon" synonymously through his gospel. I will also add that the term translated as "convulsing" used here, is not the Greek word he could have used for an epileptic seizure. It was something else that was going on. The point of this startling story is simply the demonstration

of Christ's power over evil. "What have you to do with us?" Christ has *everything* to do with overpowering evil: in the church and beyond. Evil at every level, individual and systemic.

This story is meant to disrupt and disarm each of us. It pushes us to ask this hard question: What possesses *me* that needs to be silenced? I hear Christ calling each of us to ask this question. What possesses us as a church, as a community, nation, and world, that needs to be exorcised? When we are honest and refuse to fall into the temptation of demonizing some people or groups of people as all evil and lionizing other people or groups of people as all good: That is where we can begin to engage with Jesus' business plan. Truly, there is good and evil within every heart. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn has written, (in *The Gulag Archipelago*) "The line between good and evil runs not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties, either—but through the human heart."

If you think about it, being a Matthew 25 church, means we are also Mark 1 church. You can see the throughline from our commitment to dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty back to this story of Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum. For in this story of getting down to business on Day 1, Jesus disrupts the status quo: dismantling and eradicating systems of evil. You might be wondering what is meant by "a new teaching, with authority." We know that fighting evil was not new. Here the word "new" is not meant, in the sense of "neos" or recent in time, but unprecedented, in the way Jesus taught through doing, through taking action.

Jesus came to disrupt and challenge "business as usual." He came to show us how to "turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world." He did it that day in the synagogue, day 1 on the job. And he did it again on his last week in Jerusalem, upsetting business as usual in the Temple. Turning from sin and renouncing evil is our business. It is the first question in our "Profession of Faith" that we answer when we join the church, baptize our children, and we start the new year with our "Congregational Reaffirmation of Baptism." We start by saying "no" to evil and "yes" to Christ.

Mark sets the tone of his entire gospel with this story of Jesus, from Day 1: his entry into a reordering of power.ⁱⁱ In this one act with one man, not named or developed. A man who serves more as a prop in this story. We never hear of him before or after this incident. I think this exorcism was meant to stun the congregants in the synagogue with Jesus' his power over the forces of oppression and dehumanization. A power that would lead him to the cross, set in motion by this story. His viral fame touched off that day would astonish, astound, and would curtail his life on earth.

This power over evil, seen in Jesus' life is here today, folks. It is a power given to all people, all creation, in collaboration with the risen Christ. The power of Love over evil: the continuation of the construction of The Way. Annie Dillard, in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, touches on the power of our story, Jesus' story, that we too often fail to take to heart. Or to act upon. I love this passage; you may have heard before. But it is worth hearing again:

"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake us someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

ⁱⁱⁱBeloved community, this is our story. And it is good!

Let us pray, Because you made the world and intended it to be a good place, and called its people your children; because when things seemed at their worst, you came in Christ to bring out the best in us; so gracious God, we gladly say:

Goodness is stronger than Evil (repeat together)

Love is stronger than hate, (repeat together)

Light is stronger than darkness, (repeat together)

Truth is stronger than lies. (repeat together)

Amen.

ⁱ *Book of Order*, PC(USA) F-1.01, F-1.0301.

ⁱⁱ This idea is the thesis of Herman C. Waetjen's book, "*A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's gospel*."

ⁱⁱⁱ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, (Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1982), p.40.