

“Breaking Down Walls”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 1: 21-28

As human beings, it is our natural tendency to build up walls to protect us from perceived threats. In this time of Covid, we have built up walls of quarantine and isolation to protect our physical health, but it has been at the expense of our emotional and mental health. When we encounter someone who is drastically different than ourselves, we build walls in our minds that label and categorize that person in a manner which we believe will keep us safe. When we experience pain and hurt after being vulnerable, we build walls of emotional distance which we believe will protect us from future pain. When we try something new and fail spectacularly at it, we build walls of defiance to anything new, so that we won't look like a fool again. As human beings, we are pretty good at building up walls which we believe keep us safe.

Ironically enough, many times when we build such walls, they are achieving the opposite effect. Rather than protecting us, they are harming us further, especially the emotional and spiritual walls that we erect. And in this story from Mark's Gospel, we are reminded of how God came in human form in Jesus to break down the walls that divide, so that all of God's children might be healed and changed through God's grace.

When Jesus and his disciples entered Capernaum, it is at the beginning of his earthly, adult ministry. And with that, there is a sense of newness, of uncertainty, of amazement on the part of all he comes in contact with. Perhaps the response of the crowds that day not only describes their interaction with the living, loving God, but it also describes our feeling when we witness Christ acting in our midst in unexpected ways.

Previous to this passage in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan, he withstands forty days of temptation in the wilderness, and he calls his first disciples by the Sea of Galilee. As he enters Capernaum, he brings with him Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, and they most certainly had to be as wide-eyed and uncertain about what was about to happen as the crowds they encountered.

Being the Sabbath day, Jesus does what all faithful Jews would do: he goes to the synagogue for worship. However, Jesus is no ordinary Jew, and that is made clear in verse 22: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Many times in our modern culture, we will hear the word

“authority” with negative impressions. We will interpret authority as authoritarian, leaving no room for discussion or debate.

That is not the meaning of authority in this context. Instead, Jesus spoke and taught with confidence, with clarity, and with precision about God’s law and love for the people. He opened their eyes and hearts in a new way, a way that startled them and caused them to say, “What is this?” Perhaps in school, we had a teacher or professor who brought the subject matter to life in a way that was invigorating and inspiring for us, motivating us to delve deeper into the topic in a way we otherwise would not have done. That is the power and inspiration of Jesus as one “who taught with authority.”

Then, in the midst of his teaching in the synagogue, Jesus is met by a man “with an unclean spirit.” Ironically, it is the spirit that correctly identifies Jesus: he is the Holy One of God. But this spirit also echoes the uncertainty and even the threat that Jesus poses to the established order: “What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?” The unclean spirit knows who Jesus is, but also is fearful of what his presence might mean for this world.

Jesus then does something that would have been counter to the traditional Jewish laws: he heals the man on the Sabbath day. Those who would have observed this healing – the crowds, the temple leaders, Jesus’ disciples – they all would have been taken aback by this action, for healing was considered work, and work was prohibited on the Sabbath. And yet, Jesus does not operate under the traditional rules; he has come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And so, the crowds’ reaction is understandable: “They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even unclean spirits, and they obey him’” (1:27).

One commentator notes that “in biblical language, ‘impure’ means, simply, contrary to the sacred. All that is against the sanctity of God is considered impure. Jesus’ teaching liberates the oppressed man in the synagogue. He doesn’t name the illness (blindness, paralysis, etc.). It is simply called ‘impure’: it is dominated by an antihuman spirit, which Jesus discovers, and he makes it speak. This word defines Jesus. He goes to the synagogue to teach by healing. His gospel is a healing word and action. The Jesus of Mark’s Gospel has offered, inside the very synagogue, his teaching of freedom, a word and act that heals the human being” (Ofelia Ortega, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 310-312).

It is in a space and time of worship that Jesus offers a word and act that heals the human being.

When we come into this space on a Sunday or any other time, it is to worship the living, loving God. What we bring with us into this space can run the gamut. We can greet one another and say we’re doing fine, but we’re unlikely to tell our brother or sister in Christ sitting next to us

what is really going on. We're too protective, too proud, too ashamed to do that.

We won't speak of the inner anguish we feel for a child who is struggling with addiction. We won't speak of the intense frustration we feel in trying to care for a spouse, a parent, or a loved one. We won't speak of the deep loneliness we are lost in due to grief, a broken marriage, or just the way life has become. We won't speak of the significant pain we are in, fearful of appearing weak or broken in comparison to everyone else who seems to have it "all together."

And yet here, in this space and time, Jesus says to us: "Let it go. Break down the walls you have built up, and bring your brokenness to me. Lay down the burdens you are carrying. And listen. Listen to my words of grace, redemption, and hope."

Just as he taught in the synagogue, just as he healed the man with the unclean spirit, Jesus is present in our worship, and is healing our broken spirits. As we sing the songs of faith, our voices are raised to the one who created us. As we hear the scriptures read and proclaimed, we are reminded of God's omnipresent care through generation after generation. As we pray individually and as a community, we are drawn closer to God through his only Son. We come to worship not to feel better or to leave feeling happy. We come to worship to renew our relationship with the one true God. We come to worship to be healed by Jesus Christ our Lord. We come to worship to encounter once again the mystery of faith.

P. C. Ennis is a Presbyterian pastor, and he tells the following story about being asked to perform an exorcism of sorts. He writes: *It was, I suppose, about midway in my ministry. I was serving a historic old church in downtown Atlanta. About ten days before Christmas, the secretary buzzed the intercom to say, "There is a young man here to see you. He says he wants you to bless him . . . No, he is not a member of the church . . . Says he just wants you to bless him." Well, I knew what that meant. He wanted money. They all do, especially at Christmas. Any excuse to get a foot in the door. But the emergency relief office was closed for the day, and so I said, "Sure, show him in." He was not what I had expected. He was neatly dressed, clean-shaven, late twenties, I imagined. There was an air of dignity about him, no glassy look in the eye, none of the usual signs of having "been on the street," as we say.*

"Sorry to take up your time," he said, "but I just want your blessing." He went on to explain in a rather articulate, if un-Presbyterian, way that he had this 'devil on his back' that he could not shake. As much as he had tried he could not get rid of it, and he thought that if he could just find a minister who would "bless him," the devil would go away. He did not seem depressed or overly desperate, in fact, he appeared in pretty good spirits, very much in control, I thought.

So, I made some feeble attempt to explain that Presbyterians were not usually in the practice of casting out devils or conferring blessings on people. In a bumbling kind of way, I tried to explain that we really have not been given that kind of power to heal, though somehow none of that seemed appropriate at the moment. He had not come for a lesson in ecclesiology.

"All I want," he repeated, "is your blessing."

Well, it was Christmas. So I said, "Then tell me your name."

"Andy," he said, and with that Andy knelt down on the carpet while I had a prayer, which was not so much a blessing, at least not in the traditional sense, but a rather traditional Presbyterian prayer of thanksgiving for God's presence in Andy's life: an acknowledgement of the way God had already blessed him; then affirmation of God's continuing concern and purpose for him; and the request that God would take away this "devil" that was preventing Andy from being the kind of person God intended him to be. With the "Amen," Andy stood, smiled, shook my hand and said, "Thanks." Then he left. Not a word about money or a meal or a place to stay. "All I want is your blessing," he said.

I have often wondered about Andy, and whether my feeble little effort at exorcism worked. I wonder too if Jesus ever did follow-ups on his miracle work (ibid, 310-312).

God comes in human form to break down the walls that divide us and keep us from God's love in Jesus Christ. May we have open hearts, minds, and souls to experience miracles great and small, which always point us closer to our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Thanks be to God. Amen.