

“Prophets, demons, and churches, oh my!”

- Not too long ago, Gaius and I were sitting together in a restaurant having dinner
 - I cannot remember where exactly, but since it was his turn to pick it was either Chessey’s or Meatheads
 - We were sitting there minding our own business and all of a sudden Gaius noticed someone he knew across the room
 - Now if you are around kids very much, you likely know what happened next
 - You see, 6 year olds do not have my awareness of social graces or awkwardness - it’s part of their charm
 - And at this particular stage of development, Gaius is not concerned much with how people see him or what other people think
 - Sometimes I am a little jealous, to be honest- it’s all still quite innocent and transparent.
 - You always know what he is thinking, even when he is not telling the truth!
 - But at this moment, he sees someone from school, and his face lights up
 - And in a moment, he raises his arm, points his finger, and says (in a voice that is not an inside voice)
 - DADDY I KNOW THAT BOY! DADDY LOOK OVER THERE.
 - Of course I watch as everyone around us looks over at us
 - I’m there like- sssshhhh, sit down, stop pointing! use your inside voice! people are looking!
 - I’m mortified, as every one of you parents out there understand, and frankly most people probably did not care one bit
 - We parents are definitely harsher critics of our own kids’ behavior than anyone else
 - Sure enough, he was right- the family was actually our next door neighbors in addition to someone at his school

- Honestly, I'm glad he saw them because it gave me a chance to say Hi
- On a completely unrelated note, our Gospel features a demoniac who also makes a scene...
- Pointing to someone he knew, pointing to Jesus and declaring him to be the Son of God
 - For the life of me I cannot figure out why my mind put these two stories together! :)
- And more still, our old Testament reading has God declaring that a prophet will be raised up out from among the people
- And in the end, something for us to consider today as we come together in our annual meeting and think about who we are
 - And what it is that we should be doing this next year
- I think these readings can point us in a good direction
- In Deuteronomy, our first reading this morning
 - We come along side this book of the law as it provides instruction to the Israelites
 - In particular, this section is focused on how God will be revealed to them
 - This is very near to the verses condemning child sacrifice, divination, soothsayers, those who consult ghosts or spirits or oracles of the dead
 - All these other ways that surrounding cultures at the time believed one could communicate with the divine
 - God is telling Israel it is not for them¹
 - It is through prophets that God will speak
 - God is also seeking to reassure the people that when Moses dies, God will raise up another prophet to speak
 - Now here's the thing about prophets- they are not soothsayers or fortune tellers
 - But they are conduits of God.
 - They are truth speakers, telling Israel what is really happening and cutting through the justification and BS²
 - And they point the people of Israel back to God and God's commandments, and God's promises
 - The God they know, but sometimes forget or do not recognize

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* Fourth Edition, NRSV, Michael D. Coogan, Ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) Commentary on page 280 for Deuteronomy 18:9-22

² Soards, Marion. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Volume Year B Epiphany, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 129

- It seems that prophets, a little like 6 year olds, simply point to the God that Israel already knows, but sometimes forgets.
- With this working definition of a prophet, I saw our Gospel reading a bit differently than I had before
 - Here, we pick up from where we left off last week, where Jesus had just called his first four disciples
 - Andrew, Peter, James and John had all left their fishing boats and nets and had followed Jesus
 - Now they were in the synagogue and Jesus was teaching with authority, not like those Scribes
 - I did not immediately know what that meant- how does one teach with authority- more authority than the legal experts?
 - Was Jesus convincing, was his voice loud and clear? Was the rhetoric easy to understand and persuasive?
 - I found a hint in a study guide for the book of Mark
 - It said that the Greek indicates that Jesus teaches at some length, and his teaching is like being “struck hard by a fist”³
 - It made quite an impression, especially on a man there who was with an unclean spirit- demon possessed
 - Now I don’t want to get caught here on the demon aspect of this passage
 - The ancient world view of sickness, demons, and health was very different from our own today ⁴
 - Unclean spirits were blamed for tons of things- if they did not know what was wrong with you, or how you became sick, or how to make you better
 - Or if you simply were strange, then it was simplest to say you had a demon, or an unclean spirit- very common diagnosis
 - But that’s not the point of this story anyway
 - Th point was that the most unlikely person, the demon, knew something that no one else did
 - Something that perhaps the apostles were only beginning to glimpse
 - That Jesus was someone special

³ *Focus on Mark: A study guide for groups and individuals.* (Denver: Living the Good News, 2002) p. 7

⁴ Soards, Marion. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Volume Year B Epiphany, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 136

- And the demon pointed it out, was afraid, and it obeyed Jesus when commanded to leave
- This entire passage points to Jesus' authority- in our world, more so than the local Scribe who was the legal and religious expert
- And in the spiritual world, where even demons hear, recognize, and obey
- But it is interesting to me that in these short verses, it was the unclean spirit who was most like a prophet that day
- Pointing the people back to God, back to Truth
- If a demon can do it, surely you and I can do it better.
- Surely our church can.
- Prophets, demons, and that brings us to churches
 - I bet by now you know where I'm going here-
 - As we think about our parish today, the business before us at our annual meeting
 - And indeed everything that goes on within these walls, and the things you go and do beyond them in Christ's name
 - Our goal, our vision, the basis for who we are is a place that makes Jesus known to the world around us
 - Unashamedly pointing to the Jesus we know and experience here each and every week
 - To be prophets.
- Now what does that mean for a church? How is it that we can be a pointer to Jesus and make him known?
 - Truly, there are many many faithful ways a church can live into this vision- many different configurations and ministries
 - Much diversity right here at St. Michael's theologically, socially,
 - and in the understanding how it is that we live into this call to make Jesus known
 - So here in a few minutes at our annual meeting, one of the things we are going to do is present to you something we picked up from CCD
 - College for Congregational Development @ diocese
 - It was a session called "The 12 Anglican Values"- twelve different ways that the Anglican tradition specifically lives into its purpose and vision
 - 12 ways to make Jesus known- I think you're gonna enjoy it
 - So more to come
 - And there is one more that I want to leave you with this morning- another way that we can as a parish point to Christ

- To God in the flesh, to make Jesus known
- I found this little tidbit in a sermon preached this month at the National Cathedral by Brene Brown⁵
- Maybe you have heard Brene mentioned in enough sermons already, but I tell you she is a prophet in our time
- Especially in what she thinks church should be- how it should point to Jesus
- She starts by lamenting our culture and how we have managed to sort ourselves into ideological bunkers
- Where we only see and talk to people who mostly think the same way we do
- And she says that you would think, from a sociological perspective, that would make us happy
- And in the bunkers with us, protected from all of the people who disagree, would be our best friends and one big happy party
- And yet, she observes that the more we sort ourselves into our isolated bunkers of like-mindedness, the more lonely we become
- So guess what church can offer?
- Guess how a church can not only connect people together, but point to Jesus and remind people of the God who loves them?
- It is by being a church that refuses to be a bunker.
- That teaches and points to Jesus, but stops short of insisting that everyone believes and same
- To be that place where you can share the peace with the person that for the rest of the week you'd rather punch
- A place where you sing- where else does that happen? Sing with strangers and friends alike
- And a place where we experience the risen Christ through the bread and wine
- A meal even with the people we can hardly tolerate Monday - Saturday
- That is what our world needs today- a place of diversity and compassion
- A Sanctuary- a place that reminds us we are connected with each other and no bunker in the world can change that.
- Take a look at the synagogue in the gospel today:
 - Scribes, probably Pharisees, townsfolk, Jesus, his first 4 disciples
 - And a demoniac.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndP1XDskXHY>

- All in worship together.
- I think Brene Brown would approve.
- Following the service we will be dismissed and head to the community room
 - We will get to hear all of the ways last year that this parish made Jesus known
 - And of the ways in which we are planning to do it even more this coming year.
 - God is calling this church- God has a mission and vision for this parish
 - And it includes everyone here and more.
 - May God bless us here at St. Michael's as we move faithfully into our next year.
 - And continue to point a hurting world to Jesus.

Amen.