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***“Introducing Jesus of Nazareth
(getting the message right the first time)”***

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 31, 2021
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor,

Holy Scriptures: Mark 1: 21-39

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he 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^[a] commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

²⁹As soon as they^[b] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”

³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Footnotes

- a. Mark 1:27 Or *A new teaching! With authority he*
- b. Mark 1:29 Other ancient authorities read *he*

Sermon

“getting the message right the first time”

Let’s have a conversation, you and me and all of us together.
Sermons are conversations,

with the energy from the preacher
and the energy of the congregation
meeting in the middle,
causing sparks of synergy to ignite human transformation.

We are going to converse about being introduced to God.

I'd like to hear who and how and when and why
you were first introduced to God,
to the Holy Spirit,
to Jesus Christ,
to the Church,
to the power of unconditional love.

For some of us,
that first introduction was all it took.
We were received as we are, told we belonged to God,
made to feel welcome in God's home.

For some of us,
we very much would like to forget that first introduction,
preferring the second or third time around.
We are recovering from the pain and trauma of being hurt.
Welcome home, my friends, to a hospital for healing.

For some of us,
this **is** our first introduction.
We are meeting right now, for the first time,
a God who is loving and merciful,
slow to anger and sure to forgive.
Welcome home.
You belong.

I want to hear your story.

A part of my story is that I was literally born and raised – and fell -- in the church.

When I was a toddler in a crib,
my parents started a brand new church with 5 members.
In 1961, my two parents – Buffy and George Calvert –
a neighbor named Quintina Ortiz, Emilio Graciano from the Bronx,
and a 17-year-old teenager named Ray “Papo” Rodriguez
founded the Church of the Living Hope.

One lovely Sunday morning during church worship in the Ortiz family living room
I flipped out of my crib
and hit a glass coffee table on the way to the ground.
Sliced a cut over my eye.

As a child I used to ask my parents,
“Why do I have a scar over one eyebrow?”
The answer was always the same:

since it happened on a Sunday
mom put a butterfly bandage on the open wound
and the church service continued.

For years and years I believed that hospitals were closed on Sundays.
True story.

If they were open, my childhood mind reasoned,
surely my parents would have taken me to the hospital to get stitches.
Ergo, hospitals are closed on Sundays.

Thus was I introduced to Christ's church,
one that scarred me for life,
a life of service and sacrifice and steadfast devotion
to keeping Christ's worship and ministry going strong,
no matter what.

One more aspect of the story of this Christian's introduction to Christ:

Not long after the flip and the fall, the blood and the bandaging,
my dad the pastor shared with the congregation of 5
that he was discouraged.

The Church of the Living Hope had been meeting and praying,
meeting and inviting folks
but still had not grown to more than a handful of members.
Maybe they should stop.
Maybe it was a sign to pack it in, let the dream go.

Papo, the teenager, said, "*Rev. Calvert, this is not your church.
This is Christ's Church, and He's not quitting!*"

Papo's deep and abiding faith, his gumption, his commitment lit a spark.
Suddenly the fledgling congregation was filled with a renewed energy.
They began a Sunday School for kids,
with classes in every room in apartments up and down the project's hallway.
60 years later the Church of the Living Hope is still serving, still loving,
still introducing souls to the love of God.

***They got the message:
they got it right the first time.***

As introductions go, the Gospel of Mark begins with a bang.

John the Baptist enters in high drama and with high demands,
demanding repentance and confession of sin,
calling people to be baptized with the Holy Spirit
and announcing the coming of the Messiah.

And here He comes.
Jesus enters not as a baby or a child learning in the temple
but as a full-grown adult,

ready to take on the very adult responsibility and joy
of loving God's people.

He and his disciples immediately...
everything in Mark's gospel, it seems,
happens suddenly, immediately, urgently.
They immediately go into Capernaum and get busy doing God's work.

As you overhear the Good News,
listen, look, lean into how people experience
their initial introduction to Jesus of Nazareth.
What do you think is their story?
Oh, wait, this **is** their story...

*²¹ They went to Capernaum;
and when the sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught.*

*²² They were astounded at his teaching,
for he taught them as one having authority,
and not as the scribes.*

*²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,
²⁴ and 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.”

*²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying,
“Be silent and come out of him!”*

*²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice,
came out of him.*

*²⁷ They 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.”*

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

Did you pick up
that the first time folks witness the Messiah in action He teaches,
then he heals a soul with an unclean spirit,
then he returns right back to teaching.

Scholars tell us that the fact
that the Gospel of Mark places this exorcism,
the extraction of an unclean spirit,
in the midst of Jesus' instructing about God
is to direct our undivided attention
on the power of His teaching.

In the Gospel of Mark,
the teaching power of the love of God “is connected with miracles:
Jesus the teacher stills a storm, (4:38)
the teacher raises a dead girl, (5:35)
the teacher feeds the hungry crowd, (6:34)

the teacher cures an epileptic, (9:17)
and the teacher curses a fig tree (11:21).” (Fred Craddock)

Are you like me, starting to get the idea
that the Bible is inviting us
to associate the teaching power of Jesus
with God’s power to heal, to resurrect,
to feed the hungry,
to transform lives, communities, cities?

There is a biblical, spiritual and ecclesial connection
between the sound of someone teaching with authority
and the results of human transformation.

Mark’s Gospel introduces us to a God who speaks with authority.
Jesus is the One who instructs us, who teaches us,
who has a clear understanding
of the Way of Israel,
the Way of Love,
the Way to build the Beloved Community.

Here is our Teacher who fully intends, hopes, prays
for you and me to study, listen, learn...
and apply said lessons.

In the midst of the teaching there are interruptions.
Life is full of interruptions,
and in God’s eyes every single one is sacred and special.

I introduce seminarians all the time, just as I was taught,
to the concept that Jesus interrupts you every day,
and has yet to make an appointment.
Ministry happens in the interruptions.

We see here in the Bible that Jesus is teaching when suddenly there’s
Unclean spirits to tell begone.
Broken lives in need of mending.
Diseased bodies to address and heal.
Nature to recognize and relate to.
A fragmented world to make whole by the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ.

He gets the message right the first time.
Most of the time.
Sure, Jesus has a couple flubs.
I’m not one to talk.
His batting average is way better than mine.

Let me ask you, **what happens when we don’t get the message right the first time?**

Clean up on Aisle Three!

Getting it wrong and having to go back and undo and redo

makes for much ado.

Really, really tough to fix and repair when we have to re-write the message.

It's like having to re-introduce someone
to folks they already know
and who already know them
because all did not go so well the first time.
Not impossible; yet very tough.

Look at the tragedy we are dealing with, coping with, wrestling with today.
If only we had gotten the message right the first time.
If only....

Lawrence Wright shared an essay in The New Yorker (Dec. 28, 2020)
covering the introduction and impact of COVID-19,
from its genesis in Wuhan, China
to its spread from San Francisco to NYC,
from Seattle to Atlanta.

Lawrence Wright focused on the three main chances we had
to address and quell the coronavirus.

First Chance:

“Had C.D.C. specialists visited China in early January 2020, they would have learned exactly what the world was facing. The new pathogen was a coronavirus, and as such it was thought to be only modestly contagious, like its cousin the sars virus. This assumption was wrong. The virus in Wuhan turned out to be far more infectious, and it spread largely by asymptomatic transmission.”

[Wright, The New Yorker Dec. 28, 2020]

Second Chance:

“The testing fiasco. The C.D.C. decided to manufacture test kits and distribute them to public-health labs... The C.D.C. published the blueprint for its test and encouraged the labs to ask the F.D.A. for permission to create their own tests. But labs around the country weren't made aware of any change in protocol.

Without the test kits, contact tracing was stymied; without contact tracing, there was no obstacle in the contagion's path.”

[Wright, The New Yorker Dec. 28, 2020]

Third Chance:

“The testing imbroglio would set the country back for months. But masks offered a ready solution.

The third and final chance to contain the infection—masks—was the easiest, the cheapest, and perhaps the most effective. But the Administration, and the country, failed to meet the challenge.

The Surgeon General, Jerome Adams, ...tweeted, “stop buying masks! They are not effective in preventing the general public from catching #Coronavirus.”

Such messages were partly aimed at preventing the hoarding of hospital-grade masks, but they dissuaded people from adopting all forms of face covering.

Robert Redfield, of the C.D.C., [said], “We didn’t understand until mid-March that many people with covid weren’t symptomatic but were highly infectious.”

On April 3rd, [2020,] the C.D.C. finally proclaimed that masks were vital weapons. The C.D.C.’s sudden reversal, Redfield admitted..., was awkward: “When you have to change the message, the second message doesn’t always stick.”

Worse, when the President announced the new mask advisory, he stressed, “This is voluntary,” adding, “I don’t think I’m going to be doing it.”

[Wright, The New Yorker Dec. 28, 2020]

Jason Schlabach of Cincinnati, Ohio said: (The New Yorker, Letter, Feb. 1, 2021)

Reading Wright’s report on the pandemic, I was struck by the admission of Robert Redfield, the C.D.C.’s head

[who] refers to the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic the C.D.C. and the Surgeon General explicitly advised healthy people not to wear masks; after their about-face, in April, the new message seemed never to fully sink in.

I am reminded of The Lancet’s publication of Andrew Wakefield’s infamous study linking vaccines to autism.

Even though the article was subsequently retracted, the anti-vaccine movement continues to point to its appearance in a prestigious, peer-reviewed medical journal as proof that vaccines are dangerous.

It is tragic that, when it comes to both vaccine-linked autism and mask ineffectiveness, the dominant misinformation began not on a conspiracist’s Web site but, rather, with a seal of approval from a respected, authoritative medical body.

These cases underscore the grave importance of getting the message right the first time.”

This morning I read on my cell phone the same headlines you saw.

Lead article:

Anti-vaccine crowd of 50 people
prevented hundreds of citizens
from getting the COVID-19 vaccine in Los Angeles, CA.

We have got to get the word out,
again and again and again,
because we swung and missed
getting the message right the first time.

You know who got the message right?

Ray “Papo” Rodriguez

The 17-year-old who told the pastor
“this isn’t your church;
it’s Christ’s Church, and He’s not quitting.”

Papo Rodrigues was going to Food Trades High School at the time.
He was deeply spiritual and wise.
He graduated high school and went to Shaw University in the early 1960s.
There he took part in sit-ins for civil rights.
He met a beautiful, brilliant young woman named Sandra

They fell in love and hoped to marry.
However Jim Crow laws in North Carolina forbade interracial marriage.
They went north to East Harlem, where Pastor George Calvert married them,
then they moved to La Crosse, Wisconsin.
Both got advanced degrees and became teachers.
Their daughter became a doctor.
She graduated from Columbia Medical School in NYC
and had her graduation party – where else – at Church of the Living Hope,
the spiritual home
where her father Papo
got the message right
– and gave the message right –
the first time.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!