

1/28/18 (Emanuel)

**Mark 1:21-28**

<sup>21</sup>They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup>Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>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." <sup>25</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" <sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup>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." <sup>28</sup>At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The Sea of Galilee is hardly a "sea"; at 8 x 13 miles, it makes Lake Michigan seem like the Pacific. But it holds the record as lowest body of fresh water in the world: 700' below sea level. And on its southern shore are the remains of the world's oldest known human settlement—it's 19,000 years old.

Across the lake on Galilee's northern shore are another ancient settlement—the ruins of Capernaum. In Biblical times, this town may have been home to about 1500 souls, many of them fishermen, including four famous ones: Peter, Andrew, James, John. It would become Jesus' home base when He began to preach.

Part of an ancient synagogue still stands; it dates to the 5th Century, but underneath, archeologists found older, rough-cut foundation stones about 2,000 years old—perhaps of the synagogue Jesus visited, where week after week the Sabbath services included readings, singing, preaching, prayers—all carefully planned.

We don't have a copy of Jesus' sermon that day, but whatever Jesus "**taught,**" we can be sure it reflected what Jesus always preached: "The Kingdom of Heaven *has come near.*" Into this world that sees life as a grim struggle to survive, Jesus said, God has come, bringing a *new realm* of justice, of abundance, where old barriers will fall and all God's people will live in peace. Where people will love even their enemies, where the mighty will be brought down and the poor lifted up.

Jesus knew that Rome's iron-fisted kingdom was already there, and that Rome expected to be there forever. But Jesus declared: "Rome's arrogance is fake news. *God's Kingdom* has come, and all others, Rome included, will have to go. Repent—turn around—and dare to believe God's Good News: Heaven has invaded earth!" That's important—but it's also often hard to believe. Yet it is on that outrageous claim that our faith is built.

On this particular day, His sermon is interrupted. Someone in the pews begins yelling at Jesus. Mark says that this someone has "**an unclean spirit.**" I like that he doesn't say that the man was "unclean". Something destructive had overtaken his life, yet he was still a precious human being, a child of God.

But there's something here that I don't want us to miss... We like things going like we planned them, whether the stock market or the calendar on our desk. This was a disruption. And *we don't like disruptions.*

Even *pleasant* surprises throw us off our game: You get that long-awaited promotion? Great—but they want you to move to Chicago. You get the call, and special friends you haven't seen in a decade are coming over! But, the house is a mess.

The unpleasant surprises are *especially* disruptive. The "check engine" light

comes on, and you're 500 miles from home. A routine physical uncovers something that will keep you awake that night. You get the call, drop everything, and run to the hospital.

This text too, with its unsettling image of unclean spirits, barges into our peaceful Sunday morning like a bull in a china shop, challenging our notion of life sticking to our plan. We may never see an unclean spirit—but we do encounter the unexpected, and what do we do with that?

The man here may have been a visitor—but I doubt that he was there for the first time. He was probably born and raised in Capernaum, and had disrupted worship before. If the worshipers were like most of us, they wouldn't think of kicking him out. He was family. Yeah, he's got a problem, but hey—he's one of us. So every Sabbath, the preacher just kept on preaching, hoping the commotion would subside, while the people tried not to notice. Just like we try to keep our distance from things that make us uncomfortable. I get that. I've had my share of disruptions during nice, orderly church services, trying to pretend that everything's OK during a power failure or medical emergency.

So here's a question: Can we learn to embrace disruptions—the unexpected—as holy opportunities?

When I met with Ellen to plan for this morning, I arrived right on time—and Ellen was nowhere to be found. Her staff told me: one of the children had a serious medical emergency; I'd have to wait. I was impressed as I watched the staff adjust so the other children were cared for without interruption. Clearly, they're used to the unexpected—they know that sometimes, plans are best written in pencil, not ink.

We learn that from Jesus too, who never ignored an interruption, because in the Kingdom of Heaven, everyone has the right to be heard. What I've seen is that in the human service ministries we celebrate today, especially here in PEP, they expect the unexpected and deal with people as they are, with compassion, dignity, and love. Yes, we could learn from that. I *still* could...

24 hours ago, I thought that having said *that*, I was pretty much finished with what I would say. Then I was interrupted. Not by a phone call, but by Facebook. A few news posts, a few commentaries on the news, and most of it bleak.

There is a hopeful story I want to believe about our world, and especially our country—its promise of equality and opportunity, where no matter who you are, there's a place at the table. But I see that hopeful story being "interrupted," by the dismantling of the values we've long claimed as ours. As I read the news, I face a "disruption" on a grand scale, and once again, it just wore me down, my hope disrupted, and I was wrestling with it all. So bear with me; this will take a few more minutes than I'd planned...though I do remember that there's cake awaiting us!

This is the Epiphany season in the Church; "epiphany" can mean to *uncover something hidden*. Usually, it's *good* news—like the revealing of Jesus to the world. But it can also mean what it did in that synagogue: to uncover what people *didn't* want to see. An interruption, a disruption, may actually be an *epiphany*, one that confronts us with things we are reluctant to face. For them: it was a troubled soul. For us, perhaps the gravity of this tumultuous moment in our history.

In that way, then and now, interruptions can be a call to action. Jesus could have just ignored this troubled man, finished His sermon, and kicked the man's troubles down the road. That's tempting for us when we feel we can't make a difference, isn't it?

Instead, Jesus sets this person free, because this Man whom Christians follow not only *preached* the Kingdom of Heaven—He was absolutely certain that the Kingdom of Heaven *will* prevail, as it did, over Rome, and over death itself. At least in our better moments, we've declared that ever since; every time we hear the *Hallelujah Chorus*, we hear this: "*The kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.*" This Kingdom, that undergirds every single thing Jesus said and did, is guided not by political power, or greed, or fear, but by love, peace, justice and abundance. For Jesus, an "interruption" was an invitation: to live in and act out of that Kingdom's promise, confident that God will *not* be turned away, because Heaven has invaded earth, and no matter how long the struggle, it will prevail over all lesser kingdoms, including ours. And in how we respond to interruptions that come our way, we can be a part of hastening that day. We may think what we have to offer is too small to matter, but small seeds, like ours, are how forests grow.

But in the meantime: another question: Are we like the man in today's reading? All around us, some are dealing with illness, addiction, sorrow, disappointment,...and maybe that someone is us. If we dare to ask for help *here*...will we be treated as an interruption? Or as a beloved child of God? How will we respond—especially when the "interruption" wears a face, perhaps of someone we know?

I dare to believe that as best we can, we'd welcome you in love. And for me, at least I hope *I'd* take my cues from my minister-father. And without claiming sainthood for my Dad, I suspect he took his cues from Jesus.

Ours was a small, new church, meeting in an old grocery store. When it began to fall apart, they bought a house, knocked the wall between the living room and garage out, and: instant sanctuary. It may sound like a sweet story of pioneers for Jesus, but not so much for me, the new kid at school trying to be cool, while my Dad is the pastor of the most un-cool church in town.

During church one Sunday, during the sermon, an inebriated visitor walked up to the pulpit, sobbing, and began talking to Dad. Sometimes, people whose lives have unraveled feel shame and self-loathing, and wonder how they'll be received. Dad just listened...and then turned to us and said, "Our brother has asked us to pray for him." Dad put his arm around our guest, prayed; and the man was visibly calmed. Dad then finished the sermon as if this interruption were part of the liturgy.

I have no idea what happened to this man—that's between him and my Dad—and God, I suppose. But 55 years later, I remember that awkward moment in that uncool church, when I was honored to witness, as someone's life was touched by grace a truly holy moment. Because the unexpected is part of *God's* liturgy, *every day*.

Here's where I'm sitting where you are, hearing this message for myself: When I think of the staff at Park's Edge Preschool, or *anywhere* vulnerable people are cared for—they're showing you and me that when the unexpected happens, something else may be lurking nearby: the possibility, the *likelihood*, that this is a holy disruption, a Kingdom-of-Heaven moment, pregnant with possibilities for transformation, and an opportunity for us to show grace, compassion, hope, and love: Kingdom-of-Heaven stuff.

You can scour the Gospels from end to end, and you will never read a verse that says: "And behold, everything happened just like we planned." But time and time again, the Gospels put us on notice: pay attention, because in *every* place, and at any

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moment, when we least expect it, something or someone may interrupt our tranquility, or disrupt our careful plans...and all *heaven* breaks loose.