

“What Have You to Do With Us,
Jesus of Nazareth?”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, January 28, 2018

Mark 1:21-18

“They were astounded at this teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.”

If I were to show you the cards in my wallet, they would show you the kinds of authority that we have all been given by various licensing agencies: our Ontario Driver’s License allows us to drive our cars; our Library card allows us to take out books and videos.

We have cards that give us certain benefits whether we are a youth or a senior citizen. We have cards that authorize us to withdraw money from your bank accounts. All this plastic denotes our different kinds of accepted authority within our society.

When I was at Emmanuel College, everyone had to do a four month Field Education placement. I found mine at what was then called York Central Hospital in Newmarket.

I would meet with the Chaplain and then after, walk through the hospital floors, going into rooms to visit with any patient I thought could use a visit. I found it hard work. But it was good learning for me.

One day I walked into a room where an older gentlemen was sitting in the bed by the window. He was looking at me as if he was expecting me.

He gave me his business card, and it said, Rev. Percy Brown, and underneath it said, “Licensed to preach and administer sacraments”. And he asked me for a word of prayer please.

So here I was, in second year of seminary, being asked to pray for a minister who, to my eyes anyway, obviously had decades of praying experience over my few weeks. And I was to pray for him?

What words could I possibly offer in prayer for this rather formidable ministerial presence sitting in the bed, waiting?

Percy taught me much in that visit and the subsequent visits, that my ‘authority’ to minister to him was no less than his ‘authority’ to minister to me. But I had to cross that line into unknown territory to learn this.

Two weeks ago, in the sermon I offered, I talked about two paintings of the Last Supper – where Jesus sits with his disciples on the night before he died, and shared with them the bread and the cup – and the words from that Last Supper form the heart of our church’s Holy Communion service.

The one picture was the famous painting called ‘The Last Supper’ by Leonardo da Vinci, painted in 1498.

The other picture, called ‘The Light of Conscience’ was painted in 1999 by Brazilian artist Jorge Rodriquez. It is a picture of Jesus, sitting alone at the table. He is bathed in a yellow light. The mood of the picture is unsettled, as if he is waiting for someone, *anyone*, to join him.

In a writeup in the art book where I saw this picture, the editor ruminates on the ‘mood’ of this picture of Jesus – “It is as if, 2,000 years later, the crowds have gone home.

The poignant truth is that the Christianity that gave us so many Last Supper paintings has left, as a legacy, many empty churches.”¹

That sentiment resonates with the question thrown out by the man with the unclean spirit, ‘What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth?’ Have we forgotten what Jesus has to do with us?

As I walk on the treadmill at the gym in Stouffville, I ask myself, What have you to do with me Jesus of Nazareth? In the line up at the grocery store, I ask myself, What have you to do with me Jesus of Nazareth?

As I listen to the 680 news in the car about the statistics of homeless people who died in Toronto in this past year, I ask myself, ‘What have you to do with me Jesus of Nazareth?’

As I watch Steve Paikin’s The Agenda telecast about the disproportionate rates of incarceration of indigenous peoples in Canada in contrast to the general population, I ask myself, What have you to do with me Jesus of Nazareth?

Jesus has been travelling with his newly appointed disciples, coming from the Sea of Galilee. On the Sabbath, Jesus enters the synagogue at Capernaum and teaches. The people were ‘astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.’

The scribes had a certain way of interpreting the law in their synagogue meetings. Theirs was a skilled, specific format. No Scribe ever gave a decision on their own. They would be saying, “There is a teaching that...” and then would quote all their authorities. They would never give their own interpretation of the law.

On a Midrash online ministry group I’m a part of, Marilyn Leuty, minister at St. Paul’s United in Assiniboia, Saskatchewan tossed this historical insight into the sermon fray: “Ched Myers (a ‘Mark’ specialist) says that at the time of Jesus, the synagogue was like a town hall.

Yes, on the Sabbath scripture was read and expounded there, but it was also a place where contracts were drawn up, disputes settled, community decisions made, and, in some places, where boys learned to read and write scripture.” Worship at the Temple was a different matter – with temple priests and music and sacrifice.

And so it would seem that Jesus was speaking in the midst of community, not a dedicated worship space like we’re in this morning.

¹ Ron O’Grady, Edi. *Christ for All People: Celebrating a World of Christian Art*, (Toronto: Novalis), 104.

Jesus was speaking at the ‘town hall’, where life was happening, in the forms of business, contracts, people coming and going.

“Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” And in response, Jesus offers his first act of ministry - an exorcism.

As Karoline Lewis remarked in her podcast this week from Workingpreacher.com, the ‘first thing’ that Jesus does in his ministry is an exorcism. She calls Jesus a ‘Boundary Crosser’. God will go where no one else will go.

The demonic spirit recognizes Jesus for who he is – the Holy one of God – and Jesus calls the demonic spirit to come out of the man’s body, which it does, leaving the man convulsing on the synagogue floor.

The demonic spirit knew the answer before it even gave the question – ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Restore. Heal. Forgive. Love.

God calls us into the unknown, to be a ‘boundary crosser’. Tonight I work at the shelter in Newmarket and I always feel anxious as I drive there.

Walking into a homeless shelter to volunteer has never been an easy thing for me. It is hard to do. And I go because it has everything to do with answering ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth’.

I know what you have to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth.

You call me to follow you.

And you leave an easy trail to follow.

You lead us to where we need to be.

You show us how to reach out and touch others.

You break boundaries through your love and ask us to do the same.

Jesus performed his first work of ministry in the synagogue, more a town hall than a church, a public space, where community happens, where the people are.

You can easily meet Jesus here, in this worship space. But do you easily meet him out there?

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?