



Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 2012

*"Maturity...God Help Us!"**
Rev. James Lamkin

Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13;
Mark 1:21-28

Rabbi Ed Friedman used to say that God was more invested in our maturity than in our comfort; and he said that truth shows up in the Bible's frequently challenging texts.

That seems to be the case today. These scriptures are a piece of work. They are more challenging side than comforting. If preaching were like poker, I'd fold and ask the dealer for a new hand.

One is about demon possession in a house of worship; the other is about a raging controversy in the first century about meat offered to idols.

I doubt if any of you have wondered about either during this past week. But if you have a question, this is your lucky day. How do you apply either of these to any of us?

Now, after tasting some of the spicy chili downstairs, you may wonder if the meat therein has been sacrificed to the Louisiana god of hot sauce: Tabasco. Or you may have walked away from a church committee meeting scratching your head... sure of demon possession. But other than those isolated incidences... the scriptures seem so foreign.

Not one of these topics has been brought up in a presidential debate. Nothing here about the need for jobs, or immigration reform, or the US economy which swims in the ocean of the world economy, or is health care access a luxury or a human right, or the Middle East boiling pot and what part US foreign policy plays in that. Any of these topics would be relevant.

But no, we get demons and faith based diets.

On the other hand though the topics are bizarre, the familiar theme that Rabbi Friedman mentioned is there in the substrata of the texts: God is invested in our maturity. And though our ripening may not always be pretty, it may be profound and bring strength to your life and courage to others. Maybe these scriptures can call us to maturity with God's help.

I want to take the Gospel lesson, then the epistle and show you what I mean.

Maturity...God help us...and God help us claim it!

Jesus walks into a synagogue and right off the bat is accosted by a man with an unclean spirit.

Now we are only 21 verses into Mark's gospel. Chapter 1, verse 21.

Mark has no time for shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their flocks. No Wise Men from afar. No little Lord Jesus no crying he makes. Mark doesn't need mangers, angels, or even the Virgin Birth to tell us who Jesus is. For his Jesus was the one who calms storms, heals sick, and exorcises demons. Case closed.

Mark catapults the reader right into the middle of the room with Jesus the miracle worker and it is up to us to deal with it.

If the Gospel of Mark were a video game, it would be Angry Birds. We are hurled by a sling shot, propelled by urgency.

When the disciples don't even know who Jesus is, this guy with the unclean spirit does. Jesus is one with authority.

The story happens within an *inclusio*—before and aft the people comment on Jesus' authority.

I've always imagined that to have stood in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, was to have felt the power of the presence of God. What Moses felt at the burning bush. What Jacob felt as he wrestled with the angel, and what Sara guffawed at the absurdity of what God can do.

Some felt AH HA. Others, like this demonized guy, felt OH NO.

"Have you come to destroy us?" the guy asks Jesus. No, Jesus had come to restore. Though the healing wasn't pretty—convulsing and crying--it was effective and the distraught man was made well by the authority of Jesus.

Authority comes from a deep place. It comes from identity. We are allowed to eavesdrop on the intimate conversation among thee trinity as a voice comes from heaven, just a few verses before this one: "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Authority and identity are two of the big three things that teenagers/adolescents deal with...and their parents. The third is boundaries. Authority...how do I use my power? Identity...who am I now? And boundaries...where do I stop and others start?

God put teenagers in the world to help the rest of us grow up and mature for we deal with those three things lifelong.

Parenting teenagers is a challenge because we parents forget that we are trying to relate to a person who doesn't live there anymore.

As we age we have to keep asking the question "who am I now"...now that I can no longer slide into second, now that I can no longer eat spicy foods after 7 pm, no longer birth babies, am no longer husband of, or wife of, or CEO of, or employee of, or now that no one asks my opinion anymore....

The church Inc. also has an identity/authority crisis. At one time, the Christian church was mother. The parent in control who blessed or at least tolerated other faiths. Now she is sister and sibling. And God forbid sometimes soccer practice is scheduled at 11 a.m. on Sunday morning. Who is the church now?

Maybe Mark put Jesus first miracle in a place of worship to show that religious institutions need exorcisms, as well.

It baffled the scribes and Pharisees and legal experts where Jesus got his authority. But the answer is the same place you get yours. Like the line in our church's anniversary hymn written by Bedford Davis. It comes "From within and from above."

William Sloan Coffin said, "We are called, not to prove ourselves, but to express ourselves, and oh what a difference there is between expressing and proving."

Maturity...God, help us claim it...maturing by the grace of God.

But secondly, Maturity...God help us live into it through the love of God.

Reading I Corinthians is like reading mail that was not sent to us. It is time stamped and place specific.

Though no one today wonders about meat offered to idols, we do wonder about the fine line between freedom and responsibility. That is the subtext of the text.

Evidently some of the beginner Christians were stumbling in their faith because some of the intermediate Christians weren't worried about this meat offered to idols issue. And so that Paul wouldn't be a cause for any to stumble, he decides to not eat meat.

Though it all sounds silly to me, food always has had a faith tie-in. To sit down to eat is a political/spiritual act. Right? Stand where you want to in the store, but when you sit down at the food counter in the 50's and 60's...whites only...suddenly food is a political issue.

Though Paul appears to stay, "if it's controversial, avoid it," he later doesn't live by that. Nobody can. He takes stands; and not all can stand with him. Being a Christian church is not about avoiding controversy; we can't be held hostage by the lowest common denominator. Being a Christian church is about how we relate to one another *when there is controversy*.

Eventually, Paul has had enough with the Corinthians and their nit-picky questions. They probably had had enough of Paul and his nit-picky personality. But one of them finally breaks into song, "if I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal." Then he bears down on what abides: faith, hope and love, but the greatest is love.

Naively, I didn't think my home church ever had controversy, till there was a vote on whether we should keep our theater seats or get pews. The theater seats were installed in the late 40's. They were there when I came along in 1953.

One patriarch threatened, "If the church gets rid of these theater seats and replaces them with pews, I'm going to move my membership to another church!" Whereupon another member said, "Well if you move to another church, you most definitely will sit on pews."

The greatest mark of maturity is behavior. It is Love. Opinions may vary, but love should not.

This is love with a backbone—love that claims its authority.

This is love that is not vaguely aware, but love that is clear with an identity birthed in the heart of God.

This is love that is not just well-intentioned, but love that is focused, boundaried, knowing that we can't be all things to all people, but we can give the gift of who we are to any who wish to receive it.

That is maturity—claimed as best we can; and lived-out as best we can through love.

And that is our homework, this week and every week. Amen.

*These are some of the notes James Lamkin used in preaching the morning sermon.