First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

1/28/24

The Power of Speech

Mark 1:21-28 - NRSV

**21**They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, he 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 quiet 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.

It’s the Sabbath so, of course, Jesus is going to church. Our reading doesn’t say if Peter, Andrew, James and John go with him, but I think it’s safe to say that they are there too. Now, Jesus isn’t just going to simply warm a pew, he’s actually the guest preacher for the day. I imagine when the folks saw his bio in the bulletin, there were a few mental eye rolls; this guy is from Nazareth, after all, and everyone knows that nothing good comes out of *that* place. So, the congregation settles in, resigned to the fact that what they are going to hear isn’t going to mean much, or be very good. OK, Jesus, let’s get this over with. I’ve got to get home and get the pot roast out of the oven before it dries out.

As Jesus starts to preach, people’s ears perk up. Whoa! This guy isn’t half bad, in fact, he’s kind of good. He’s teaching with authority; unlike those other guest preachers we’ve had to put up with. We’ve never heard anything like this! Maybe something good *can* come out of Nazareth, after all.

Now, in the congregation sits a man with, as Mark puts it, an unclean spirit. And in the middle of the best sermon these folks had ever heard, this man stands up and starts heckling Jesus. “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.” Yikes! What a disruption! How embarrassing! I imagine the ushers couldn’t get to the guy fast enough in order to get him out of there. Before the ushers could get to the guy, though, Jesus tells the unclean spirit to be quiet and come out of him. And this unclean spirit obeys! Oh, my goodness! What’s happening here? This preacher can even command unclean spirits and they listen to him. WOW! What amazing authority this guy has! We gotta go tell folks about this, it’s just too juicy not to share! Hey Ethel, did you hear what happened in church today? This weirdo was in the congregation and he started heckling the preacher! I know, right? How awful! Then this preacher; he was from Nazareth, yeah Nazareth, can you believe it? Anyway, this preacher orders the unclean spirit to come out of this guy and, get this, it did! It was awesome! This preacher is really something, that’s for sure. I gotta go, there’s a whole bunch of other folks that need to hear about this! Talk later, bye!

In recounting this event, Mark uses the phrase “unclean spirit,” which in his day would have been understood to mean “demon.” Now, whether you believe in demons or not is, ultimately, beside the point, because what Jesus did here was to heal someone who was sick. Was he possessed by the devil, or mentally ill? I’ll leave that to you to decide.

The point is that Jesus used the authority given to him by God to heal this man, simply through the use of his speech. No touching, no laying on of hands, just Jesus commanding sickness to leave this man’s body.

Another thing to note here, is that whether the man was possessed or suffering from a physical or mental illness, his condition caused this person to be the first one to acknowledge who Jesus really was when he tells Jesus, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” I imagine the congregation must have been shocked by that statement, because this guy actually refers to God by name, which was a huge no-no. This probably resulted in a fair number of gasps and peal clutching.

Now Mark doesn’t tell us what the topic of Jesus’ sermon was, but it’s a safe bet to assume that whatever Jesus was preaching about, triggered this guy and led to the outburst. And that leads us to what I want to focus on today; the power of speech.

Words have the power to uplift, encourage, enlighten and bring healing to those around us. Words also have the power to cause pain and suffering, when used carelessly. Words spoken in anger, or without consideration of how they might impact the listener, can be absolutely devastating and the ramifications can resonate for years. I find this to be especially true when those who have been given the authority to bring God’s word to God’s people misuse that authority by speaking words that demeans others.

Recently, Bruce and I, along with about 25 of our friends, attended a funeral for one of our group who had passed from cancer. It was a pretty standard LDS funeral, and we all were grateful for the opportunity to pay our last respects to someone close to us. Brandon’s parents welcomed us with open arms, his sister in law gave a beautiful eulogy that had many of us in tears, our friend Bobby sang a couple of lovely pieces and everything seemed to be going just fine. That is until Brandon’s uncle spoke. The language we heard in that talk was not about Brandon’s love of his family, or the love Brandon had for his dog, or his incredibly upbeat attitude, in the face of a terminal disease; qualities that we all greatly admired about him, but rather the talk focused solely on the need for Brandon, and by extension those of us who counted ourselves as Brandon’s friends, to repent. This gentleman wasn’t calling for repentance in a general sense, which I probably could have taken in, even if that may not have been the best venue for such language. Instead he chose to single out his nephew, and his nephew’s friends, and call us to repent of a specific “lifestyle” which he happens to personally disagree with. It was, to say the least, difficult to hear. And while I promise no one stood up and challenged Brandon’s uncle, although we should have, I will tell you that several of our group did get up and walk out.

How many times have you sat in church and heard language from the pulpit that divides and belittles instead of uplifts and unites? I imagine we’ve all experienced sermons like that at some point. Hearing that type of language, does raise a question. Can we truly call ourselves followers of Christ if we use language, or engage in behaviors, that divide God’s people into “us versus them?” I don’t think so, but too often that opinion is a minority view within the Christian church. The only thing Brandon’s uncle accomplished with his speech, was to harden the attitudes of a group of people who already view organized religion with suspicion. There was nothing spoken that made anyone want to reconsider their relationship with the God *or* the church. And that’s my point, here. The power of speech, especially in a religious context, can bring people closer to God, or push them away from God.

What Jesus really accomplished, in our reading, was to drive out the evil of division. He banished the unclean spirit of “us versus them,” and in doing so, Jesus restored this man to his community, and I believe that each of us has the ability to do the same.

So, how do we use the power of speech? Do we speak without thinking about how our words will impact those who hear them? Or do we use language to uplift, inspire and heal?

Words matter, period, full stop. How we use words, matters, period, full stop. And because words, and how they are used, matter we have a choice. We can use words that uplift, inspire and yes heal, or we can use words that demean, divide and harm. It’s our choice. So, choose wisely, my friends. AMEN