

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, February 1, 2009*

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany Year B

Some of us grew up going to Sunday school. For some, Sunday school was a deeply formative experience that set us on the path of Christian discipleship. For many, I fear, Sunday school was more about punch and cookies than about serious study or commitment. These days, popular culture often uses the term, "Sunday school" to describe something that is less than impressive. Have you ever heard someone say, "We're serious about this, quit treating it like it's Sunday school." I hope that we can overcome that perception. This first Sunday in February, The Episcopal Church observes what is called "Theological education Sunday," a time to reflect upon the wide variety of ways in which we learn about God. It is a good time to consider what Sunday school has been, but more importantly what it can be. It is a good time to consider the teaching of Jesus, our savior and educator. His teaching has authority. His teaching has power to drive out unclean spirits. His teaching can touch us so deeply that we will never be the same.

In this morning's reading from the Gospel according to Mark, we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue. The people are astounded, because Jesus' teaching is not like the scribes who can recite the law chapter and verse but have no gravitas, no power, no umph. Jesus is not just having them color a picture of the Torah scroll. When Jesus teaches, the people have a sense that he not only knows his stuff, he embodies it. He lives it. He communicates it in his very being.

Then trouble suddenly arrives: a person with an unclean spirit, what some might call a "demon," a person possessed by a chaotic and malevolent voice. Right there in the middle of the worship service, in the middle of the sermon, this possessed person appears, picking a fight with the teacher.

We Episcopalians do not talk much about demons and unclean spirits. There might be some of us who take this passage at its word that the man was actually possessed by an evil ghost of some kind. Others of us might see the unclean spirit as an ancient way of understanding a mental insanity, a severe psychological crisis. In either view, it is easy for us to distance ourselves from the person in the story. Most of us do not feel possessed by a demon. Most of us are not insane to the point where we would burst into church yelling at the preacher...and I appreciate that! I wonder, though, if we might actually relate to this person with the unclean spirit more than we think.

What are the "unclean spirits" that possess us from time to time? What are the voices of disorder and ill will that want to fight with the teacher, that want to challenge what we know to be good? I know there are some mornings when I wake up on the wrong side of the bed and feel like I have been taken over by some grouchy ghost. Parents of young children, myself included, often report that when the children do something especially frustrating, the parent experiences a most unfortunate transformation. The voice, the eyes, the whole body, they change. I don't want to say it is a demon, but I have to admit it is pretty scary. There are other unclean spirits we can

name. Rage. Hate. Prejudice. Addiction. Greed. There's a powerful one. Greed for power and money has turned normally good people into monsters who will assent to the unjust suffering of others in the name of victory and wealth. Is our current economic crisis in some ways due to our being possessed by a spirit of greed? And then there is fear. When we are deeply afraid, we can act and speak in ways that turn us into deformed versions of ourselves. So even if we do not believe in demons, even if we do not have a diagnosis of insanity, we can still relate to the experience of having an unclean spirit.

Jesus, the teacher, casts out the unclean spirit. The people who witness the exorcism declare, "a new teaching – with authority!" Jesus' kind of teaching has the power to drive out the demon. Jesus' form of education has the weight to prevail against the deforming influence of negativity and disorder. When Jesus teaches, people do not simply find it interesting...people get healed.

When we talk about Sunday school, are we talking about Jesus' kind of education? Are we talking about education that heals, that confronts our inner demons? For many of us, when we hear the words "theological education," "Christian formation" or "Sunday school" our eyes glaze over. It sounds boring. It sounds like an academic exercise, interesting perhaps, if you're into that sort of thing, but not urgently needed. It is like eating our vegetables: a good idea and good for us, but not necessarily our first priority.

I encourage us to look at our education as followers of Christ differently. I challenge us to engage in education that heals, that transforms, that frees us from unclean spirits. When we sit down for a Bible study, we are not simply going to a book club. We are putting ourselves in the presence of God's Word, the Word that reminds us of the best and worst of who we are and the promise of God's love and grace, the Word that will transform us if we let it. When we listen to our guest speaker talk this morning about spiritual icon paintings, we are not simply looking at some pretty pictures. We are learning about how to seek the face of Christ, to stare into the unsee-able eyes of God. When our younger children enter the sacred space of the Godly Play classroom, they are not simply acting out Bible stories with little wooden figures. They are learning the saga which has inspired generations of God's ordinary children to do extraordinary things. They are stepping into the shoes of slaves who found their freedom, into the sandals of prophets who declared God's judgment and mercy, into the paths of all those who sought the healing power of a savior. If we do it well, Sunday school is a place where we experience that power. If we do it well, theological education is an opportunity to know God and to be healed. If we do it well, Christian formation is where we bring our worst demons and discover our best selves. We know what it means to be possessed. We know about feeling deformed and debilitated by the worst in ourselves. Jesus Christ, the holy One of God has a new teaching, a teaching with authority, a teaching that restores us. When we do it well, this church is our school. This church is where we learn how to be followers of Christ. This church is where we learn how to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. We may not look like the ivy league, but we have a vine, the true vine, and we are all the branches. The church is not just the clergy and a few people who like Sunday school. The church is all of us, and we do our best learning all together as the whole body of Christ. We can all come and be learners. Come and be teachers. Come be astounded and amazed. Come and be healed.