

Called to Authenticity

By
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From the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

January 28, 2024

Psalm 111

¹Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. ²Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. ³Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. ⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. ⁵He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. ⁶He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. ⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. ⁸They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. ⁹He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. ¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

Mark 1:21-28

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

Today we come to the end of a mini-series, if you will, with three weeks of considering the call of disciples to follow Jesus. Two weeks ago, John's gospel showed us how Jesus asks his followers to keep our eyes open, to see the needs of people around us and to treat them in the manner of Jesus himself. Last Sunday we listened to Mark's telling of Jesus calling fishermen from beside the Sea. We noted how they got up, with no questions asked, and followed after Jesus. Today we can see they haven't gotten very far when Jesus begins to show them more about who he is and where he will be leading them. In eight brief verses Jesus confronts religious customs about Sabbath observance; he demonstrates his authority by connecting his words and actions; and he confronts the power of evil by healing a demon, an unclean spirit. As Jesus begins his public ministry, the first thing the disciples witness is Jesus' authentic presence of God on earth.

Capernaum is a small fishing village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Throughout the gospels it functions as the center of his ministry. Jesus shows up in Capernaum repeatedly and mostly what he does there IS teach and demonstrate his power to heal. Mark says the congregation recognized Jesus as one having authority, but the details point to something even greater. Jesus personifies God's authenticity by connecting his teaching and healing. What Jesus says cannot be separated from what he does. Look up the word *authentic* in the dictionary and you will see what I mean. Authenticity speaks of genuineness, truth, reliability, legitimacy, integrity, trustworthiness, credibility, veracity, faithfulness. Authenticity is what we want in relationships with family and our closest friends. Authenticity is what we have come to expect in our relationship with God. What Jesus says is who Jesus shows himself to be. In this first public act of ministry we witness this coherence.

So let's look at what's at stake here and how that informs our own authentic discipleship. This teaching and healing takes place in the synagogue on the Sabbath. It's a double-header confrontation. A demon possessed person is not welcomed into the synagogue, and no one

should be healing on the Sabbath. The ancient Jewish traditions of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes enforced a holiness code that deemed many people unworthy to enter the place of worship. A ritual boundary line kept out the sick, women, those deemed mentally unfit or physically limited. Since most of us are not battling demon possession on a regular basis, let's remember it was a catch-all diagnosis in the first century. Unclean spirits or demons referred to any one of numerous, vaguely defined spirits who opposed God's purposes. In the Old Testament whole armies of demons are said to do battle with God and God's people. By New Testament times, the notion that demons were evil further developed into the idea that they could invade human bodies causing disease, a physical infirmity like epilepsy, a mental illness or emotional disorder. Inanimate objects could also be inflicted by demons, like a potter's wheel that didn't spin right. Simply put, demons or unclean spirits, were standard explanations for things not being the way they should be.¹

Kind of like a virus. My computer can get a virus; I can get a virus that is hard to diagnose. But a demon not only made you sick for a while; it excluded a person from human community. So pervasive in the religious culture was this notion that these spirits could overtake human beings, which isolated people from community, that we are told Jesus went from town to town casting out demons. What Jesus' authentic words and actions convey is that no one should be banned from community. No one should be left alone and isolated, or forbidden from the communal worship of God, no matter the infirmity.

One of the things we touched on last week was the reality of the current decline of Mainline Christianity in the United States. Following World War Two there was an uptick in religious affiliation. During the Cold War American Christianity was aligned with a political fervor against atheistic communism. As the Baby Boomer families expanded into the suburbs of urban centers, denominations like ours planted new churches

¹ Paul Achtemeier, ed. *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, P. 217.

and expanded denominational centers to produce curriculum, engage in mission, and to keep up with rapid church growth. Beginning with the counter-cultural movements of the 1960's this trend reversed. Mainline denominations have been splitting over contemporary issues akin to ancient holiness codes about who is welcome, or who meets certain theological and political criteria of purity. Denominational structures are now shrinking and closing churches everywhere.

What a blessing it is to be in a growing church, but there are lessons for us in these trends as well. Studies show that the children of Baby Boomers are the most disengaged generation of religious life in America. When you drill down into the reasons why, surveys say that younger Millennials and Generations X and Z put this one thing at the top of the list: lack of authenticity. There are exterior reasons given – from clergy abuse scandals to a declining trust in American Institutions in general. But when pushed to give answer, the primary reason voiced by the unaffiliated is lack of authenticity. Jesus teaches about love and forgiveness; demonstrates God's power to heal and restore people to community, but for the last three or four decades the church in general has been fighting over who is in and who is out. Are women worthy of being leaders? Will LGBTQ persons of varying sexual orientations be welcomed? Is the church paying enough attention to Environmental Stewardship? To matters of justice? To the continuing deep and pervasive issues of racism in American life? You see, young adults often care about many of the things Jesus cares about, and may be calling the church to greater authenticity.

In a recent article entitled "Americans Under 30 Don't Trust Religion – or Anything Else," journalist Jessica Grose notes: The under 30 set has a high level of distrust in a variety of institutions and leaders, including religious ones. She writes, "For a long time most Americans respected society's institutions and systems and expected that even if people had differing opinions, the adults would of take care of things. That's changed. Now both Millennials and Gen Z see people vociferously complaining, lobbing accusations, lacking integrity, people cheating and

not abiding by normative conventions of the past. This is a really different environment to come of age and learn about how institutions – including the church – operate and who they operate for.”

Several of the younger responders to her inquiry likened moving away from faith traditions of their childhood to a Jenga Tower. You know the game where the players erect a tower of wooden blocks to begin, and then remove pieces one by one, until the whole thing collapses. They say they lost faith in the religion they were raised in when the load-bearing blocks were being removed and eventually they felt the structure collapsed for them.²

And what were the load bearing blocks? The teaching and actions of Jesus to love, welcome, include, reconcile and draw people into communion with God. In a word, studies show that your average younger adult raised in the faith wants a community, followers of Jesus, whose words and actions cohere in an authentic way. That happens in the church, it certainly happens here, but we could likely be more intentional about matching what we say in here and how we act out there.

Sarah Speed is an Associate Pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. While she was in college in Richmond, Virginia, she was beginning to discern a call to ministry. In an attempt to clarify this early vocational leaning, she took a job at a small Presbyterian church in town with a warm and friendly congregation. Her job included starting a Youth Group. It wasn't long after she began that work that one of the high school students ended up in the hospital following a failed suicide attempt. The youth confessed to her mother that she had been enduring abuse, unbeknownst to their family. She ended up in a treatment program, a therapy center that could help her unpack her trauma and begin to heal.

² Jessica Grose, “Americans Under 30 Don’t Trust Religion or Anything Else,” New York Times, Nov. 25, 2023.

The congregation formed a small care team that wrote her letters during her treatment. It included people like her confirmation mentor, a childhood Sunday school teacher, someone who had simply sat in a pew near her family her whole life. For weeks this care team took turns writing letters to the youth in treatment. It was a time which had begun with her being convinced that she would never feel good again, that the scars of her trauma would be the first thing she saw every day, that the trauma would always be in the front of her mind. But that church team kept writing letters. They told her, *You are not alone. We are not giving up on you. Although we cannot imagine what you have been through, we see you and include you and love you. You are and always will be one of us, a treasured part of this community.*

So now, that youth is a young adult with a life she never could have imagined when the trauma began. She has a college degree, a group of friends, a baby niece to adore, a dog keeping her company. She has joy that she didn't know before. Sarah writes, "I know from talking with her, that when everything good in her life felt out of reach, it was the church, telling her all the places they saw God's fingerprints, that got her through. So when things in our lives threaten to erode our faith – let us, your church, tell you what we see. Let us tell you about a girl who came back to life."³

I would add to that awesome testimony, let us tell others about where following Jesus has taken us, and how he breaks the silly holiness code that excludes certain people from worship. Let us tell others about his authority over demons, and his ability to restore people to community again; let us tell others about his broad, inclusive love that excludes no one. Then may our actions match our telling, may our following match his authenticity, as our actions cohere with our words.

AMEN.

³ Sarah Speed, "Are You the One?" *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2024.