

What Happened In Church?
Mark 1:21-28
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 1, 2009

“What happened in church this morning?” is the usual question asked by someone who didn’t make it.

President Calvin Coolidge, known for being a man of very few words, was asked by his wife, “How was church this morning?”

“Fine.”

Knowing getting information from her husband was like pulling teeth, her next question was more specific.

“Well, what was the sermon about?”

“Sin.”

“Well what did the preacher say about sin?”

“He’s against it.”

Being fully aware of what happens in church goes beyond remembering the sermon and the hymns. Knowing what happens in church really means knowing WHO happens in church as you wait for God’s presence to emerge from your worship.

Unfortunately we’ve been culturally conditioned to equate going to church to going to a play or concert. We take our assigned seats, sit back and wait to be “moved” by the music and the sermon, thinking whatever happens depends on the performance level of the worship leaders...unless of course something unplanned happens, then all bets are off.

Once in a while there are unexpected interruptions that happen in church that might initially make you feel frightened and angry, but then, can leave you wondering and amazed.

One Christmas Eve it was unseasonably warm so the front doors of a local church were left wide open. During the pastoral prayer, just after the minister paused for a moment of silence, a young man pulled his car up to the front door and began shouting obscenities that echoed through the sanctuary. The people quickly unbowed their heads looking shocked and angry, until the pastor, not missing a beat, continued praying, “God, forgive those who shout obscenities in the night.” What a save!

Mark’s gospel tells a similar story. It’s the Sabbath; the synagogue is full of worshippers when suddenly they’re interrupted by a young man possessed by an evil spirit.

Certainly this demoniac’s outburst was as unwelcomed as the young man’s obscenities on Christmas Eve. But like the pastor, who didn’t miss a beat and continued praying for that boy, Jesus confronted this interruption by casting out the demon and restoring the troubled man to the community.

Many themes can be gleaned from this story: the constant battle between good and evil, or the people’s insightful recognition of Jesus’ unique authority vs. the bland moralisms of their “official” religious leaders, and then there’s the wide open topic of exorcisms, demon possession and spiritual healing.

But maybe this Bible story can profoundly speak to us by combining all these themes into one by framing the question, “If something unplanned and extraordinary ever does happen, if an “unclean spirit” ever interrupts our worship, how should we respond?”

According to Mark the members of that congregation acted like spectators, watching the action from the sidelines and letting Jesus do all the heavy lifting. In all fairness though, what else could they be but spectators? It all happened so fast because Jesus immediately took charge.

But here’s another interesting question: What would’ve happened if Jesus wasn’t there to take charge, leaving that congregation to deal with this interruption on their own?

Probably the only possible answer could be they’d deal with it pretty much the same way we’d deal with it.

Most of us would sit frozen in our seats. A few would try to escort the troubled man out of the sanctuary, and if he went peacefully, they’d try to find a way to help him, and there’d be others fumbling for their cell phones, ready to dial 911 if the situation got out of hand.

All the above would be appropriate immediate responses. But do they go far enough? For sure, this scenario, inspired by Mark’s story, is fraught with danger, we’re talking about a demon possessed man after all. So let’s take it down a couple of notches, remove away the element of danger and broaden the venue from our church sanctuary to an untimely interruption to your daily routine by someone you’d rather not deal with.

Probably through my ministry at the county jail, I’ve been relearning an important lesson: to put myself in my neighbor’s shoes and stop stereotyping people who make me feel uncomfortable or downright self-righteous, because it’s not doing me or them any good. If Jesus is going to have any chance to use us to cast out demons and bring healing, there needs to be the attempt on our part to look beyond our neighbor’s “unclean spirit” until we can begin to see the child of God hidden beneath the surface.

As you imagine that man with the unclean spirit invading that synagogue, you probably see a raving maniac, dressed in rags, foaming at the mouth and screeching at the top of his lungs. But beneath that ugly exterior, Jesus saw a human being, created in the image of God.

Do you think it’s possible that poor man was once a neighbor in good standing, maybe even a former worshipper returning to his home church looking for friendship and healing? And what if Jesus wasn’t in that church that morning, could that poor man have found either?

We’re always being reminded of our Christian responsibility to “be Christ” to our neighbor trusting God’s grace will take up the slack whenever we fall short. But what does becoming Christ-like mean? To begin with it can mean allowing any interruption, no matter how uncomfortable or inconvenient, to become an opportunity to be compassionate and generous. A quick read of the gospels reveal most of Jesus’ best work happened when he welcomed these interruptions from people with some disease or dysfunction that isolated them from the community.

The question, “What happened in church?” should make us realize what happens “in here” should have a direct impact on what happens “out there.” But what happens “in here” must first have an impact you and me.

We usually feel good hearing stories about Jesus restoring people with unclean spirits to their communities because you and I instinctively identify with them and want

to believe Jesus loves and accepts us just as much. But when you're confronted with someone else with an "unclean spirit" and you're the one expected to be Christ to that person, that's when you can disconnect from the story and recast yourself in the role of a disinterested spectator.

The Apostle Paul offers a suggestion to get you reconnected so the gospel story can continue through you.

Do nothing from selfish ambition...but
in humility regard others as better than
yourselves. Let each of you look to the interest of others. Let the same
mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus
who though he was in
the form of God
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited
but emptied himself
taking the form of a slave
being born in human likeness... (Philippians 2:5-7)

You see what happens in church really depends on what happens in you. Did God happen, did you let Jesus cast out your unclean spirit, change your mind and heal your heart so you can open yourself to Christ and your neighbor?

Of course, Christian discipleship, as I said last week, is risky business. When you make yourself available and realize life's interruptions are really veiled opportunities, you'll be putting yourself on the line with no guarantees. But isn't that what Jesus did for you?

So when you come to church, be ready for Christ to happen to you so Christ can happen through you so that when you return to your own neighborhood, you'll be ready and willing to turn any interruption into a blessing.

That's what should happen in church.