

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

January 29, 2012

Next summer several of Bethlehem's youth will be attending the ELCA National Youth Gathering in New Orleans. I suspect they will have a great experience. My suspicion is based upon my own experience. I had the privilege of attending one of the ELCA National Youth gatherings in St. Louis back in 2000. I remember that we brought 4 teens to this amazing gathering of thousands upon thousands of Lutheran youth from all over the nation. We worshiped, prayed, had fun, and took part in a number of servant projects around the city and at least once a day everyone came together in a very large arena. Everyone. If I remember correctly, everyone came to about 40,000 people. Can you imagine how busy and frenetic that place was ... buzzing with activity, noise, excitement? There was one evening, however, when all 40,000 of the youth and adults gathered in the large arena and the noise dissipated. No. Actually, the noise went away. Amazingly, the whole place fell silent on that one night when the keynote speaker gave his address. The name of the keynote speaker was Desmond Tutu. You may have heard of him.

Desmond Tutu, the retired Archbishop of Cape Town in South Africa, has a certain charisma. He radiates joy and peace. His words are wise. And he backs all of that up with an amazing personal story. As you likely know, Tutu was he an outspoken critic of his own government's policy of racial segregation called apartheid. He was among those who sought to change the system. He was also very active in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up after Apartheid to deal truthfully with the violence and human rights violations that occurred with the goal of seeking reconciliation between perpetrator and victim and restoration for the whole society. You can well imagine that Tutu spoke to this crowd of 40,000 youth and adults about such things. He spoke about "ubuntu," a call to common life - the African notion that a person is not a person without other people. He spoke passionately about the power of forgiveness and reconciliation and that life worth living is centered in the holy God. I'll never forget it. When he spoke a hush came over the entire crowd. It was the only time there was a complete silence in that large arena with all those people. The only time. It was as though this powerful little man had us all in the palms of his hands. How in the world do you get thousands of people, including teens, to be so attentive? I don't know, but it happened.

I'm convinced that it wasn't just a matter of what was said but who was saying it. For what was being communicated that day stemmed from nothing less than the power of God. And so the words silenced the crowd ... so much so, that you could hear a pin drop.

I imagine a similar scenario in the Synagogue at Capernaum long ago. It was a Sabbath day. Jesus came to teach. When Jesus spoke to the community gathered that day for the Sabbath service, he spoke with a kind of authority. There was something genuine and new

and holy about him. We are told that the congregation assembled that day in the Synagogue was astounded at his teaching. And why wouldn't they be? They were in the presence of the living God. I imagine a hush over the crowd; all eyes directed to Jesus, people struck with awe, sitting on the edge of their seats. I suspect it was a situation where you could probably hear a pin drop. That's how it was until ... until another voice cried out. The silence was disturbed by the voice of a person deeply troubled. It was the voice of an unclean spirit or a demon. "What have you to do with us, Jesus? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are." The demon let it be known that Jesus had no business being there. Even though Jesus was preaching good news of the Kingdom of God, the demon would not stand for it and let it be known that who Jesus was and what he was about spelled trouble.

So, the demon cried out, but Jesus rebuked the demon. The same Word that silences a crowd, silences demons as well. Jesus was no ordinary teacher. Jesus carried with him the authority of God, a power that even casts out evil and exorcises demons.

Perhaps you have witnessed something as dramatic as what we hear in today's Gospel reading. Personally, I've never witnessed anything so dramatic, but whether it's high drama or not, God is at work healing the world and silencing demons. The coming of Jesus signals the breaking in of God's kingdom which is nothing less than a new creation breaking into a world broken by sin and evil. It is no mistaking that here in the first chapter of Mark as Jesus begins his ministry, following his baptism and the calling of the first disciples; he is harangued in public by a demon. It represented a different power at work in the world, undergirding the very powers that would defy Jesus and put him to death. It is a power that is public – and at odds with the Kingdom of God.

It shows up in people, and systems and communities and nations in hatred, greed, racism, rampant violence and as the Christian community we are called to embrace the power of that Kingdom present in Jesus. That's the power for which we pray and in which we live and do ministry.

Do we appreciate how powerful this Word or God is? Do we trust it or give it authority?

I've long appreciated the comment of writer Annie Dillard: "Does anyone have the foggiest ideas of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect does no one believe a word of it?" She suggested that instead of wearing hats to church we should come wearing crash helmet and instead of passing out bulletins, ushers should pass out life preservers and signal flares. God's Word is that powerful. But we may tame it down, make it palatable, even domesticate it or keep it at bay because we might be afraid of this power to change us.

Yet, it is a power we invoke. Like when we pray the Lord's Prayer every Sunday: "Thy [your] kingdom come, thy [your] will be done ... deliver us from evil." Praying the Lord's Prayer is really a kind of exorcism. Deliver us from evil. It is the prayer of the Christian community struggling to live freely – free from the powers that destroy life – and free to embrace the power of God that gives life. A power that even silences demons.

And notice that we pray constantly to deliver US from evil. Not just them, whoever "they" may be, but all of us. That's the honest acknowledgement that demons show up in me and you. That may not be the stuff of high drama like what Jesus encountered that day in the Synagogue or what we might have seen in movies like *The Exorcist*, but they are the things that disrupt and even destroy life like addictions or malice or things that may not stricken us as so dramatic because sadly they have become accepted or normal or even cherished: things like being a workaholic or becoming excessively greedy or jealous.

Now, I could come clean and name before you today all my demons but I'm afraid we would be here a very long time. But, one that shows up now and again is my need to be right. It reminds me of the bumper sticker I once saw that said "Everyone is entitled to my opinion!" When the need to be right possesses me, I shut my ears off to the ideas of others, or worse may not be particularly open or loving to someone else and when we are so gripped by these powers our failure to love others or ourselves disrupts the reign of God and the Kingdom in our midst. Sort of like the demon that disrupted Jesus that day in the Synagogue.

I remember years ago going on a rant about some things to a friend and I was coming off rather self-righteously and after my little diatribe my friend said: "Brother you need to pray!" Not bad advice. For just in the simple act of praying we realize that we're not God!

Last Wednesday night I shared with the JOF group that one of the reasons Christian come together to worship and pray and encounter the living Christ each and every week is that we forget who God has called us to be and in hearing God's Word and praying we remember who we are and what God calls us to be, but it's not simply remembering alone. We are also here to participate again in the very work of God and wonders of God and we have come to know again that there is a very different power at work in the world, a redeeming power, a healing power that we know in this gathering and at this Table and we come to praise and thanks and sing to this God praying that our idols and our "little gods" will be dismantled and that the voice of evil will be silenced. We come to be changed, trusting that the One who speaks in our midst – Jesus Christ Risen – not only brings a hush to a crowd - so much so that you can hear a pin drop, but silences demons, too. Even our own. Amen.