



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“A NEW TEACHING”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 11; Mark 1:21-28

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 31, 2021
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Mark 1:21-28

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

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our ten year-old daughter, Mary Caroline, has really been pressing us of late to let her watch the movie *Jaws*. We’ve been very reluctant to let her do so, “But mom and dad,” she’ll say, “it’s PG.” And then we go into this sort of back and forth. “You know, honey, PG doesn’t mean today what it might have been in 1975.” And then it goes back and forth. We’re still holding the line, and I’ll be honest though, our hesitation, it also stems from the fact that they were all such beach people, and Mary Caroline, she absolutely loves going into the water, and I don’t want that to change! I don’t know how old I was when I first saw the movie *Jaws*, I do know that for the next couple of years, thereafter, every time I headed out into the water and I looked at the waves, I found myself repeating those infamous words...“Just when you thought it was safe to go into the water.”

I remember one of the scenes particularly well. Richard Dreyfuss, Roy Schneider...they’re out on the boat. Schneider catches a glimpse of this shark that’s been terrorizing their charming small coastal town for some time, he takes one look at it and backs up slowly, and in bewildered dismay he says, you remember the line probably...“You’re gonna need a bigger boat.” That line was for me one of movie history’s greatest understatements, and in my opinion is right up there with Arnold Schwarzenegger when he says to the clerk in the Police Department, “I’ll be back.”

When I think about the use of understatements in my own life, I recall how it was that in high school, and if I started dating someone, which wasn't very often, if one of my friends were to ask me about her, I would jokingly respond by saying something like this: "She could make a fox hug a hound." or "She could make a train take a dirt road." Right, something silly. But when my parents first asked me about Martha Ann, when I downplayed our relationship and said, "Yeah, she's pretty cool," they knew I was smitten.

It shouldn't come as any surprise to learn that there are even statements in the Bible that we might consider understatements. I think it can sometimes be seen best when we look at the various translations of the Bible. Listen to how one version translates Luke 4:1-2 ... "Jesus full of the Holy Spirit returned from the Jordan and was led by the spirit in the desert where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry." He was hungry. Well, that's one way to put it, isn't it? The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the NRSV, the version from which we read each Sunday morning, it translates verse 2 like this: "He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished." Famished. That's more like it.

In Acts chapter 15, Paul and Barnabas and other believers are with the council in Jerusalem, and they're grappling with the question of whether or not Gentiles needed to be circumcised. And the council eventually concludes that they're not going to trouble the Gentiles with circumcision. Now one version of the Bible says that when Judas and Silas and Paul and Barnabas, they get to Antioch, and when they present their official declaration with letter in hand, we're told: "The people read it and were glad for its encouragement." I tend to think that those grown Gentile men were more than just a little bit glad. I think some of them might have been dancing in the streets. Here again the NRSV offers arguably a slightly better translation when it says... "When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation." That sounds a little bit more like it.

In this morning's New Testament Lesson, we find yet another statement that feels a little bit like an understatement, so let's take a moment and set the stage, as it were. The Bible tells us the people were gathered in the synagogue on that day that Jesus came to Capernaum. And to begin, the town of Capernaum, it carries with itself the name of an Old Testament Prophet, Nahum - Capernaum, and it's not just some hole in the wall town. Capernaum has some measure of prominence as a community situated on the northwestern portion of the Sea of Galilee, and not surprisingly, it has a thriving fishing industry. At this time in history, probably has about an eight-foot wall, and a couple of piers going out into the water, as I alluded to earlier, we know from various evidence that Jesus at some point in his life, he left his hometown of Nazareth and spent so much of his time here in Capernaum, we would consider it his home. Other evidence suggests that Jesus may have later even lived with Peter, and when some of us traveled from Charleston to the Holy Land and visited Capernaum a couple of years ago, we saw what archaeologists think was in fact Peter's home.

And we also saw the synagogue, though not the one that Jesus visited. The one that's there now was built around the 4th century, was at least renovated around that time. It is beautiful and it's somewhat ornate, and it gives us yet another example of how Capernaum had a bit of an upscale quality about itself. So, there they are in the synagogue, which is where the rabbis and the teachers, they would go, and they'd visit with the gathered faithful, and they would teach them

the scriptures. The Bible tells us that the people were amazed at Jesus' teaching. It says that his teaching was different than that of the scribes, which tells me that he, Jesus, probably didn't spend a whole lot of time breaking down and parsing the words of the scriptures and wowing the people with his command of the language. Jesus probably didn't quote from a hundred different rabbis, each of whom quoted from a thousand different others. No, Jesus spoke from the heart, and the Bible tells us that he spoke with "authority!" Clearly that was wonderful; they were astonished.

But what happens next was a bit overwhelming. For just as Jesus had finished teaching, as the people were probably beginning to stretch and get comfortable and gather their belongings, maybe wondering if their favorite booth at the S&S cafeteria is still available, just then the Bible says, "There was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit." We wouldn't want to miss that in church today, would we? I mean we have some drama in the sanctuary from time to time...a bulletin might fall from the balcony...a baby might cry...someone might fall asleep...we've had an alarm go off...we've had a llama come down, I've heard. But imagine witnessing a genuine unclean spirit. That's what this is! That's what the Bible tells us it is. This is not an example of a mental illness. This is not a troubled person. This is a person who's been overtaken and is overcome by what the Bible describes is an unclean spirit, and I know that that is so difficult for us to relate to. It's not part of our experience, but it is very present in the scriptures. And lest we think that these spirits in the Bible are metaphorical, let us remember what Jesus also said, "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the Kingdom of God has come to you." It's as if Jesus were saying that when we see this kind of thing happening, that is a surefire indication that none other than the Kingdom of God is upon us. "I know who you are," howled that something deep inside this man, "You are the Holy One of God."

It's interesting that at this point in the story, there's no evidence to suggest that anyone else there fully understood who Jesus was and what he came to do. In fact, the only one who talks about the true identity of Christ is this unclean spirit. What's also interesting is that not only is Jesus recognized, but so is his power. So, it happens that without any kind of expansive exorcism liturgy, Jesus simply speaks, "Be silent and come out of him." Down he goes, convulsing, crying, the people are all out of sorts and confused and probably riveted at the same time, and finally out comes the spirit, and the man is unburdened, he's healed.

Here comes the understatement...the people having witnessed something otherworldly, having stood in the presence of God in Christ, they look at one another and they say, "What is this? A new teaching?" A new teaching, is that what we'd call it? I mean if something like that happened to us here this morning, I don't know that we'd be able to say much of anything. Maybe we run for cover; maybe we would walk up to Jesus and with tears in our eyes, we would embrace him; maybe we'd remain in our seats and in humble adoration we'd pray like we had never prayed before. We may do all of those things and more, but I seriously doubt that we consider what happened to be some new form of Christian education. Of course, having said that, let us keep in mind that that understatement, though it does come across as downplaying this or that, it nevertheless gives us a glimpse at what is happening, so maybe this really is a new teaching.

I dare say that into this sanctuary every Sunday, walks the kinds of burdens that we would wish upon no one. Circumstances that prevail upon our neighbors, that would seek to control their

lives and do them great harm, situations that would suggest that the end of the story has been all but written...it's basically the end of a child of God, and yet today, can we not also affirm that those realities are but temporal realities, and that all of them, every single one is subservient to the one who still speaks with authority? Ah, to be certain, that the troubles that befall us at the end of the day, they will all come to know that very authority with which Jesus speaks, for Jesus is today and will forever be the Holy One of God, and when Jesus says, "Be silent and come out of him!" or "Be silent and come out of her!" the ills of the world will have no other choice than to come out.

What is this a new teaching? Well, perhaps it is, and if so, may it continue to inspire us today. For whether our classrooms, our life's classrooms, whether they had the kind of dramatic flair of a synagogue in Capernaum in the 1st century, or they are comprised of life's tragedies, or perhaps even those quieter awakenings of God's claims upon our lives, however it happens, the teachings of the Lord our God will prevail...they always have and they always will.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.