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St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
4th Sunday after the Epiphany/Year B/Annual Meeting Sermon Address
January 28, 2018
Text: Mark 1: 21-28

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

Jesus has already called his first few disciples, fishermen who have left everything behind to follow him. They don't know what he has called them to. He has not yet begun his ministry healing the sick, the lame or the blind. He has not yet fed anyone with fish or bread. But they go with him to the synagogue where Jesus astonishes his listeners with his presence and teaching. They have never heard anyone speak as he is speaking and as one with authority. That is, until a man begins to shout and Jesus finds himself going toe to toe with a man possessed with an unclean spirit.

Who is this man? Where did he come from? Had he been in the synagogue before? He's loud. Uncouth. He is interrupting the flow of things. He draws our attention the way an unkempt, smelly, shrieking homeless man might if he showed up here at St. Barnabas. Do we pause and see what will happen? Should we call 911 and have that person escorted from the property?

Jesus does not call for an usher, guard or a disciple to escort the man outside. Nor does he as the Son of God cause the man to crumple at his feet. He listens. *"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"* Jesus tells the spirit to leave the man alone and it does. Jesus has that kind of effect on people, don't you know?

For some of us educated modern day folks, this story may be a stumbling block. We would rather and understandably want to believe that this confrontation was beyond the possibility of demon possession. Christians are uncomfortable with the notion of demons and so for some it is better to hear this story as just another healing story among many. The logical explanation could be that perhaps the man had a psychotic breakdown of some sort or suffered from multiple personality disorder or Tourette's syndrome-something that might be cured or controlled with daily medication. Added to that there are those images on the Hollywood screen that have shown us young girls with heads spinning and spewing green pea soup or staring into a TV screen full of noise and static and announcing, "They're heeerrreee."

But this passage is not about mental health, spinning heads or poltergeists. It is about the Holy One of God showing compassion for one of God's own, of restoring wholeness to one who had become terribly broken. In a way the man represents anyone who has ever found themselves isolated, isolated from who they truly are, and from others, or from God. He represents anyone who has ever asked in times of darkness and despair, "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?*" And in those desperate times there is a longing to hear the answer, '*Everything. I have everything to do with you.*'

In his sermon, "I have everything to do with you", the Rev. Michael Marsh suggests that "We are not so different. Each one of us also longs for that answer because we too know the separation and brokenness of our lives. We've lived in isolation. We have been trapped in grief. We have carried the burden of guilt."*

There are other things effect who we are. There are other "demons" and voices that sometime "possess" us and seek to keep us from the abundant joy-filled and grace-filled life meant for us as children of God. Anger, fear, greed, sexism, racism are just a few. What are some of the other "demons" that we seem to encounter within ourselves? In the world? What might some of those be?

(wait for answers)

It is overwhelming, isn't it? The longer we live, it seems, the more we see and experience evil all around us. Every week there is another catastrophe or the threat of one. There are lives, young lives, taken too soon. We could make a long list and yet...and yet...there are people who live and work for good. There are people possessed by the love of God and willing to share that love with brother and sister, neighbor, stranger, even enemy. They mirror the very image of God come down from heaven, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ who calls us each to wholeness and fullness of life. Retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said: "Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death."

In the synagogue Jesus could have said, 'Yeah, right, right, right. Let me finish my point. I'm on a roll here.' No, he looked at another child of God straight in the eye and claimed him. What did Jesus have to do with the man possessed? **EVERYTHING!** And he told the unclean spirit to 'Shut up!' "*Be silent, and come out of him!*" And it did.

The Good News is that we serve a God whose power and love wins over the power evil and hate. God is still at work casting out the unclean spirits of the world. God is still at work claiming us as God's own. God will not allow his children to go down into a dismal abyss but instead draws them closer to God's self. God is continually speaking to us the words we long to hear in times of trouble, uncertainty, and dis-ease: 'You are mine. I have *everything* to do with you.'

Following Jesus is probably the hardest or one of the hardest things Christians do especially in the times in which we live. Going to church and talking about being in relationship with God is not like it once was some 20, 30, 40, 50+ years ago. According to articles written about the declining church; more and more people are out of touch, out of sync with the notion of God or the idea of organized religion. Some will say that they are 'spiritual' but don't feel the need or want to spend Sunday mornings in church. Some say they are not being "fed". Well, what exactly does that mean? Do they expect to be entertained? Do they come to church to be fed roast beef sandwiches? Borrowing a conversation between our bishop and a quote from our good sister, Shug Goodlow: "We come to church for one reason and one reason only-to worship God!"

Still there are other things that keep people away: past hurts and experiences, anger at God, disagreements with church leadership (meaning clergy) or fellow parishioners, work, scheduled school and sport activities, illness, exhaustion, travel, family obligations, and obligations to self. I am sure there are other reasons.

Like other churches we bemoan the fact even some of our own children who faithfully went to bible classes and served as acolytes don't spend much time with us as they have now grown up and are raising families of their own and going about their daily routines. I read an article just the other day of how adult children are now putting the blame on their parents for their lack of attendance!

But we don't need to rehash a myriad of surveys and essays on the subject, do we?

The Episcopal Church, like many other mainline denominations, is experiencing a steady decline in attendance. And here at St. Barnabas, like several other churches within the diocese, we are experiencing the same thing and for many of the reasons mentioned.

While I/we are grateful for each opportunity to gathering amongst ourselves as the Body of Christ, we are anxious about seeing more of the wooden pew than another person. Illness, deaths, the aging process, freedom in retirement, and people moving to be closer to relatives, and to feel “safer” are part of the equation too. And like other churches we find ourselves situated in a changing community.

Our financial situation? Our deficit? Our deficit is not new. But I’ll let John speak to those things.

Still, nothing I’ve said regarding our situation is new. But they raise serious questions about our future.

Last year in 2017 we celebrated our 60th anniversary and we celebrated with this theme: *St. Barnabas, a place to call home...then...now...always...* It was and is a great slogan as we celebrated who we were, who we are now, and where might we be in the future.

And in the midst of all our celebrating we took a survey. The CAT survey (Church Assessment Tool) told us a lot about ourselves. We love worship and we do it well. We love our music program and we do it well. We are pastoral in taking care of one another. We are great at hospitality and so many other things and yet there are a few things that need working on like flexibility, adding on to our number of faithful worker bees, making changes to attract others especially families with children (every churches’ wish), and being comfortable just the way we are which could be both good and bad. Good because we are a loving community and yet a community such as ours cannot rest on how things used to be or be satisfied with the familiar. In his book, “Autopsy of a Deceased Church”, Thom S. Rainer makes a well- known point- in order for a church to stay alive it must look outside itself or face a certain death.

From this survey we also named our top four goals:

- Make necessary changes to attract families with children and youth to our church
- Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to reach new people and incorporate them into the life of the church.
- Work to renew and revitalize the community around the church by building coalitions with partners that share this vision and commitment
- Develop ministries that work toward healing those broken by life circumstances

By the end of 2017 we held two 'Coffee Talks' to go over some of our strengths and weakness and we will continue to be in conversation in this new year. To this point, the Vestry has already begun to do and will continue to do the work of strategic planning and as we go along we promise to keep you in the loop and get your feedback, input, and your vision. There is much work to do and we call on the Holy Spirit to help move and shake us.

And we've begun to do something else that many of you are aware of if you've been reading the past months' *Salts* or joined us in the last conversation regarding the survey-we have begun or rather, renewed a relationship with our sister church, St. Stephen's. Not for the purpose of merger. Dennis has made it clear on that point. These conversations at the moment are not being had for the purpose of merger but because the leadership, lay and clergy, believe for the life of our churches and the communities we serve, an Episcopal presence is needed in North County.

Both St. Stephen's and St. Barnabas are pretty much in the same boat as are other churches in the diocese as far as memberships and finances go. And we both want the same things-to attract new families, to reach new people and incorporate them into the life of our churches, we want to be part of the renewal and revitalization of our communities, and we want to be part of the healing process for our neighbors. We want to bring others into the whole of the Beloved Community. Our task is the same-to make disciples. And we are looking for ways to make this happen in both Ferguson and Florissant. And we believe that there are some things like ministries we can share and things we can do together as sisters and brothers in Christ. (What a blessing it was to have fellowship after Bill Wardle's service in St. Stephen's Hall. What a blessing it was to worship alongside them two Sundays ago when there was no water in this place.) Whether there will eventually be a merger or a reunification of our two churches only God knows. What the future will hold we just don't know but I for one am grateful for the conversations and grateful for the faithfulness of God. I am grateful we are trying to be faithful to the Gospel. I am grateful for all of you.

As I say just about every year-there is no magic bullet. These are uncertain times for our church and for churches far and near. No one knows what will happen within the next year or two or three. It will take all of us working together. At times it will be challenging and perhaps even messy. And yet in this season of Epiphany we are reminded that a light shines in the darkness and that is the light of Christ.

Like those first disciples we are not sure where God may lead us but our call is to remain faithful. Our call is to remain prayerful alone and together. Our call is to come together for worship to hear the Word of God and to share at the Lord's Table, and to love each other and to invite others to join us in worship and in loving relationship. Our call is to remain faithful to our mission statement:

“The mission of St. Barnabas’ Episcopal Church, a parish for all people, is to extend God’s gracious love and hospitality to each other and to the community by providing worship that inspires, opportunities for service and growth on life’s journey, and a sacred place in the heart of Florissant where people can find wholeness and strength.”

Our call is to follow Jesus who has the power and authority to put demons and their voices of gloom and doom in their places.

And when we have our moments of doubts or when it seems we have hit that brick wall or the way seems too unclear we can look to him and say, *“What have you to do with us?”* And we will hear his answer, *‘Shhh. It will be alright. You are mine. I have everything to do with you.’*

Amen.

*portions of this sermon are inspired by ‘I have everything to do with you’-A Sermon on Mark 1:21-28; Epiphany 4B, 2012, by The Rev. Michael K. Marsh