

The Real Authority of Super Bowl Sunday

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Rick Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on February 1, 2009.

First I want to point out an error in today's worship bulletin. On the front cover it says that today is the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. This may be the only place on the planet calling today the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. Even the youth group did not sleep over here at the Cathedral and cook up gallons of chili in observance of the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. In the real world, people in the know are aware that today is Super Bowl Sunday. The Lectionary Design Team ingeniously set Jesus' amazing performance at the Capernaum Synagogue in contradistinction to the Super Bowl half-time show!

The Super Bowl may now have less to do with excellence in national professional football, than with corporate marketing. And the marketing is based on the erroneous good news that more consumption will make us happy and whole. I don't mean to belittle the integrity of good, healthy sports. (But with New England on the sidelines this year, it is a bit easier for me to critique the woes of Super Bowl mania and marketing.)

The million dollar minute ads, the Hollywood entertainment spot light and the money being spent to produce it, seems all a part of the million-billion-trillion economic tsunami which is overwhelming our nation week by week. Not only is it a false economy, it is based in false values without ethical, moral standards. And here is where the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany has meaning.

For Christians, the Epiphany is an opportunity to rediscover the spiritual rock of Jesus in this storm-torn collapse of houses foolishly built on sand foundations. God is waiting in the wings to show us new acts of salvation. Sometimes we seem to have to stray into the wilderness, before the need for salvation becomes apparent. Is it an epiphany to rediscover the spiritual authority of Jesus and the values implied for our lives? Is it an epiphany to move beyond denial and remember that there are unclean spirits needing to be confronted? Is it an epiphany to retrieve our vocation as Christians to proclaim the good news of God in Christ? When Jesus began his ministry here among us two thousand years ago, times were also hard but his teachings were astounding, and the good news was heard as new news.

First, Jesus embodied the authority he had been given by God through his teaching. Secondly, Jesus confronted the unclean spirits. And later in this gospel narrative, Jesus gave his disciples (and gives us) authority to proclaim the good news.

Today, we find Jesus with four of his recently-drafted disciples in the synagogue at Capernaum, where perhaps for the first time, Jesus makes a public appearance teaching.

1) JESUS EMBODIED THE AUTHORITY HE HAD BEEN GIVEN BY GOD

Teaching with authority changes peoples' lives. My own life was changed by people through whom God's powerful Spirit connected to my heart.

My first calling was to be a teacher, and then a teacher of teachers, and a high school principal. Like you, I have had many teachers in my life. Some of you are teachers. It is a wonderful vocation. But as you know, there are teachers and there are teachers. Some are like the scribes in the synagogue, doing their job, covering the basics, without heart-felt compassion or spiritual energy.

Who are the teachers you remember, who taught with a real sense of authority?

My grandmother, Avis Ella Myrick, was a wonderful teacher. When she was a student at Freedom Academy which was our private secondary school prior to public education in rural Maine, she was asked by the local Superintendent of Schools to take a leave of absence mid-way through her junior year, and teach in the Halldale one-room school. She did for one semester, and then returned to graduate as Valedictorian of her class the following year.

Later, after raising her family, when I was four or five years old, she again spent some time teaching in that one-room school, grades kindergarten through eight, where I was privileged to visit for several days. We had to get there early on cold winter mornings to shovel the path and build the wood fire in the barrel stove in the middle of the one room. A big container of water was carried from a nearby farmhouse, and yes, there was an outhouse. Communion was sweet gathered around that barrel stove at noon time when each person would break out a home made lunch, sometimes sharing bounty with those from poor families whose fare was meager. Gram had a reputation for being strict and well-organized, but was intimately involved with every family, knew each child's circumstances, and did all she could to meet their needs.

I attended a two-room public school, and am thankful for Evelyn McDonald, my sixth, seventh and eighth grade English teacher who taught English grammar with a sense of authority which bode me well in later years in school. And there was Charlie Cosgrove, my High School Principal, the first Roman Catholic I had known, who read the Christmas story to the school assembly with great emotion and awe. He made home visits to the families of each student in the Academy during the summer for personal counseling and course registration. His compassion for students, the obvious joy he showed in his job, and his amazing commitment to public education, inspired me to follow. Are these stories humble examples? Perhaps. But in our business, lives are more often touched one at a time.

2) JESUS CONFRONTED THE UNCLEAN SPIRITS.

Not only was Jesus an inspirational speaker and storyteller, he spoke the truth boldly in the face of evil. The man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue perceived that Jesus' message was challenging the status quo, "Have you come to destroy us," he shouted? The man represented the religious establishment, preoccupied with inward-focused survival, spiritual bankruptcy, squandered resources and a broken system. In effect, Jesus was

calling the people back to the core truth and spiritual values of their community, spoken earlier by the prophets. At his next stop in Nazareth, he would quote Isaiah in defining his ministry to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed.

What parallels to Jesus' advocacy come to mind today as we seek to reach out? Is our voice for justice spoken loudly enough to be perceived as a threat to the establishments of our time? What would Jesus speak to decision makers in our health care system? What would he say to the education establishment? How might he advocate for affordable housing?

A footnote in my Bible explains that the spirit was called "unclean" because "the effect of the condition was to separate people from the worship of God." To the extent that we remain personally separated from the students and their families at the Oyler School, or the Peaslee Center, or from our guests downstairs on Tuesday nights, or any other groups or neighborhoods in the city or in other parts of the world, we live in sin, which is separation from God. And we are disabled from exercising the authority Jesus displayed in the synagogue. He not only taught inside, he went outside and met the people where they were. He not only spoke the good news, he took the good news and practiced the good news.

3) JESUS GIVES US AUTHORITY TO PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS.

Just last week during the Baptismal liturgy, we all reaffirmed our vows "...to persevere in resisting evil, and to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ."

Later in the sixth chapter of Mark, Jesus called the disciples together and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits." We have been commissioned to spread the good news, to confront spirits that separate people from God, and to be instruments of healing. While we may not want to own it, or to be responsible for it, we have been given authority to speak and to act in Jesus' name.

When the words or images of the last commercial at the Super Bowl have faded away later today; when the last word of analysis has been spoken by the sportscasters at the post-game wrap-up, and the viewers have been counted and polled; the last word remains. It is a word counter to a culture of greed, consumption, and counterfeit happiness.

It is a word of hope for the poor; release for captives; sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. It is the good news that God's love is free and the most powerful force in the world. Most likely, the setting will not be the grandeur of a stadium in Tampa, but will probably be your own home, or your work place, or the community in which you live your day-to-day lives... a place as common as a one-room school house in rural Maine.

Super Sunday; super God; super Jesus; super Spirit. How can we not shared this good news and live it? Amen.

