

“A New Teaching”
Mark 1:21-28
4th Sunday after Epiphany

January 31, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

A little over 200 years ago,
a child was born to a prominent Calvinist minister,
a child who would grow up to become a minister himself,
a grand figure in 19th century America,
a preacher whom one biographer has described
as “The Most Famous Man in America”
for that day and time...

Do you know who I’m talking about?
The preacher’s name was Henry Ward Beecher.

Henry Ward Beecher may best be known today as the younger brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” But in the 19th century, her brother Henry was what we would refer to as a ROCK STAR.

He was the pastor of the enormous Plymouth Church in Brooklyn.

Thousands would show up to hear him preach. People like Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and even Abraham Lincoln came to hear Beecher’s “energetic performances” from the pulpit.

One reason that Beecher was so popular is that he went against the strict Calvinism in which he was raised, preaching instead a “gospel of love”. He was an outspoken abolitionist, doing everything he could to rally his country against slavery. He spoke in support of women’s suffrage, a good 50-60 years before women received the right to vote in our Constitution.

But Henry Ward Beecher also became famous for another, less flattering reason. In the 1870s, Beecher's longtime friend, Theodore Tilton, accused Beecher of adultery with Tilton's wife, and sued him for it.

“Criminal conversation” is what it was called back then. And the 6-month adultery trial in 1874 captivated the country.

The trial itself ended in a hung-jury, after Elizabeth Tilton confessed to the affair with Beecher, and then retracted, and then confessed, and then retracted...it was quite the drama.¹

But I share all this not to recreate the drama of that trial for you.

I share all this because I'd like you to consider how history should look back on this famous American.

What kind of person was Henry Ward Beecher? Was he a faithful and courageous disciple of Jesus because he used his pulpit to take a stand against slavery, to fight the evil and injustice of his day?

Or was Beecher a fallible human being, popular and gifted, to be sure...but also someone who battled his own demons, making mistakes that caused great harm?

I think the Gospel writer Mark would have found Beecher to be a fascinating case-study. Because for Mark, the good news of Jesus Christ is presented throughout his Gospel as A BATTLE.

A cosmic battle.

¹ Information presented here about Henry Ward Beecher comes from “The Gospel of Love,” by Michael Kazin, a book review of Debby Applegate's *The Most Famous Man in America*. The review appeared in *The New York Times* Sunday Book Review, July 16, 2006.

It's about good vs. evil, the powers of the demonic vs. the power of God.

And Mark makes it very clear from the beginning of his Gospel that the outcome of this battle is not in doubt. When Mark writes in verse 1 of the “good news” of Jesus Christ, the Greek word he uses is “Euangelion”.

It gets translated as “good news,” but that’s a bit understated.

As one commentator puts it:

“Euangelion...did not refer to just any sort of good news, [like] “Tomorrow will be sunny,”...the most literal translation would be “good news of victory from the battlefield.”²

It was a military word.

It was a way of saying—the powers of evil and darkness and oppression have been defeated by the love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

And so we come to our text for today, a text in which the battle lines are drawn right away.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when a man with an unclean spirit enters the room. And the demonic forces that have captured that man—they recognize Jesus at once!

“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.”

To which Jesus replies:

² William C. Placher, *Mark*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

“Be silent, and come out of him!”

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

It sounds like a great victory for Jesus, and new life for the man who was healed.

But then...Mark writes something that's a bit strange. He says that all the people in the synagogue were “amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority!’”

I would've thought they'd say, “A new healing! A new miracle!”

But a new teaching??

It's a curious way to describe what just happened...unless, of course, Jesus wasn't just trying to heal the man with the demon.

Stay with me here...

The crowd in the synagogue that day—

they saw a man with an unclean spirit enter their holy space,
and that's ALL that they could see.

His was a battle that was lost.

He was a problem, a source of trouble...

They looked at him, and they thought:

This is who he's always been.

This is who he'll always be.

But Jesus looked at him, and Jesus didn't just see a hopeless situation.

Jesus saw a child of God.

Jesus looked at him...and **he refused to demonize him.**

Maybe that's the teaching—the new teaching, so important to God's battle with the powers of darkness—maybe that's the teaching that Mark wants his readers to hear.

A story appeared in the *Village Voice* in NY City many years ago. The great actress Dorothy McGuire was appearing on Broadway in Tennessee Williams' play *The Night of the Iguana*.

Just before curtain time on a Friday night,
a shrill, shouting, female voice was heard throughout the theater:

“Start the show! Start the show!
I want to see Dorothy McGuire!”

Clearly something was going on with the woman who was doing the shouting. And after the shock of her initial outburst had worn off, the audience began to turn on her.

“Listen, you old bag, get out!” someone heckled.
“Throw her out! Start the show!” another jeered.

The house manager came to try to reason with her, but the woman pulled away, shrieking, “All I want is to see Dorothy McGuire.”

Suddenly, through a part in the curtains, Ms. McGuire herself appeared. She crossed the stage and walked calmly over to the woman. She spoke quietly to her, and hugged her.

As they were walking together toward the exit, the audience was visibly relieved. But before they left, Ms. McGuire paused and turned to the gathered assembly.

With grace and kindness, she announced, “I’d like to introduce another fellow human being.”³

You see, the fascinating thing about the way the Gospel of Mark treats the demonic is that it’s NOT only Jesus who has the power to get rid of demons. In chapter six, there’s this paragraph in which Jesus gives the disciples authority over unclean spirits...and the disciples cast out many demons.

Which means battling the demons of the world is not just Jesus’ job.

It’s the Church’s job.

I look out at the world, and I see plenty of OPPOSITION to the love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

White nationalism.

Anti-Semitism.

Entrenched poverty.

Domestic violence and abuse.

The list goes on...

You may see other demons in our society as well.

But the question becomes, how do we address those problems, without demonizing our fellow human beings along the way?

³ As told by Thomas G. Long in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Without writing someone off as irredeemable, as hopeless—
and saying, “*This is who they’ve always been,
this is who they’ll always be...*”

I recall something that the theologian Miroslav Volf wrote in the days after 9/11.

He said he had a friend who told him, “Nothing is gained and much is lost if we describe the terrorists as evil.”

Volf disagreed.

“If we drop words like ‘good’ and ‘evil’ from our vocabulary,” Volf writes, “we seriously misperceive the character of some acts and may abandon our response...”

But Volf goes on to say that none of us are exempt.

“Most of us may not be as evil as [terrorists],” Volf wrote, but “Even at our best, scripture teaches we are not pure goodness; our most lofty ideals are tainted by evil.”

“To call [something] evil is not to place [the person who commits the act] beyond the pale of God’s redemption...”

All of which puts a claim on us as Christians.

Miroslav Volf concludes by quoting the Apostle Paul: “If our enemies are hungry, we should feed them; if they are thirsty, we should give them something to drink. Instead of being overcome by evil, we should overcome evil with good.”⁴

⁴ Miroslav Volf, “Evil and evildoers: No one is beyond the pale of redemption,” in *The Christian Century*, November 14, 2001.

I'm reminded of something that happened in 2013, in a suburb of Atlanta.

Antoinette Tuff served as a bookkeeper in a middle school.

Her life was not going well.

Her husband of 30+ years had recently left her.

She suffered from depression.

She was in debt.

She was in danger of losing her car to creditors, her only source of transportation to work...

And then one day, while she was in the front office of her school, a man named Michael Hill walked in with a gun.

And Ms. Tuff did not panic.

And Ms. Tuff did not scream.

She somehow managed to lower the temperature in the room.

In 911 recordings of what took place, Ms. Tuff can be heard saying to Mr. Hill:

“It’s going to be alright. Sweetie, I want you to know that I love you, okay? I’m proud of you...We all go through something in life. You’re going to be okay. It’s going to be alright.”

In the end, police were able to arrive at the scene in time,
and not one person was hurt, not one person was killed.

Where did Ms. Tuff get the calm, the nerve,
the presence of mind to do what she did?

She said it was what she learned from her church about prayer, that prayer is NOT just something we do at a designated hour but something that we live out “in any given moment.”

She said she was praying the whole time she was talking to Mr. Hill.

And it changed how she saw this stranger.

When Mr. Hill entered the school, Ms. Tuff says she saw someone who was hurting, someone who “did not need me to judge...[him] or be mad at him.”

She says that she saw a neighbor
 “in an unstable condition...
 needing me to show him love.”⁵

In other words, she saw the evil that COULD happen—
 and she saw the child of God buried beneath that evil.

This, I think, is the NEW TEACHING that Jesus gives us.

Through parables,
 through healings,
 through exorcisms—
 Jesus taught people that every person is God’s beloved child.

Do you remember when Jesus called the tax collector named Levi to follow him? And the Pharisees were complaining, why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners?

⁵ This story comes from two sources: “How One Woman’s Faith Stopped a School Shooting,” on NPR, January 31, 2014, found at [How One Woman's Faith Stopped A School Shooting : NPR](#). It is also told in Jonathan L. Walton’s book, *A Lens of Love*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

When Jesus looked at Levi, he saw something the Pharisees could not see. A child of God who can be changed by the power of God.

Yes, said Jesus, a tax collector is who he's been...but there's someone else in there. Someone else he's meant to be...

One of my colleagues, a good friend and pastor with whom I worked in Texas, is the child and grandchild of immigrants. Her grandparents fled the Netherlands and Germany after WWII.

She has Dutch grandparents who protested the rise of Nazi Germany and sheltered refugees in their barn.

She also has German grandparents.

Her German grandfather was drafted to fight for the Nazis as a teenager, to participate—without a choice—in that evil. He was captured by the Americans at the Battle of the Bulge.

There are, of course, many horror stories of American POWs who were not treated well by their captors during WWII.

And yet, when my colleague's German grandfather was in the POW camp, the American soldiers guarding the camp treated the prisoners with dignity and respect. Her grandfather worked in the kitchen, peeling potatoes, and he would visit with the American soldiers keeping watch.

They found they had a common faith in the same God. According to her grandfather, he was treated so well in that POW camp that he decided he wanted to immigrate to America after the war.

So he did.

In 1952, many Americans were not exactly friendly toward German immigrants.

But when my colleague's grandparents entered this country, they were welcomed by a Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan. They came with nothing, and the church provided them with an apartment, with jobs. Some of the ladies in that church even taught my colleague's grandmother English.

All because some American soldiers refused to demonize the enemy.⁶

Of course, that's not just something for guards at a POW camp to do.

Refusing to demonize people..it's something all of us can do.

What do you think would happen if you woke up every day committed to doing just ONE THING—
 seeing everyone, treating everyone...
 as God's beloved child?

Do you think God might do something miraculous through you?
 Do you think God might bring healing to someone
 caught in forces beyond their control?

I think Mark would say yes.
 I think Jesus would say yes.

⁶ I am indebted to the Rev. Susan Sytsma Bratt for this story.

What about you?

Amen.