



“Biker Jesus”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 8, 2009
Mark 1:29-39 (NRSV)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The scripture reading for today is a slice of Mark which reveals one of the distinctive features of this gospel.

This feature has to do with Mark’s unique emphasis on secrecy. In Mark, unlike the other three gospels, Jesus instructs the disciples to “tell no one” about his teachings and miracles. This is such an odd directive from a person — and about a person — whom we Christians have always been taught to go and tell about. But it makes sense when we consider that this gospel emerged in a context where the early Christians suffered extreme prejudice, so that going and telling others what Jesus had done was to put your life — and the lives of other Christians — in danger.

This insight into Mark helps us understand the community out of which this version of the gospel emerged as a kind of secret society — a Christian underground — that was both extremely tight and that took significant risks in naming and claiming the Christian identity.

Beyond the general code of silence that permeated the Markian community, we encounter this theme of silence in an even more peculiar way in today’s reading, in that we hear Jesus’ miracle described as “silencing the demons.”

It’s interesting to contemplate what kind of malady would benefit from silence.

Perhaps the voices that Jesus silenced were the voices of people in **physical pain**, who once healed, no longer cried out in anguish.

Perhaps the voices mentioned were the kind that people living with **schizophrenia** describe — disturbing and unrelenting voices heard only in the minds of the afflicted. Maybe Jesus silenced those voices.

Or perhaps the voices that Jesus silenced were more metaphorical than literal. Perhaps those voices were like the feelings that **addicts** sense when they feel the need for a drink or a drug. Maybe Jesus cast out those kinds of demons.

We'll never know for sure what kind of demons or voices were silenced by Jesus. Our modern questions remain a mystery as we read these ancient stories remembered and passed on by people unacquainted with modern diagnoses and protocols.

Still these things we can know for sure: we know that Jesus healed. We know that his healing reunited suffering persons with their families and friends, and restored them to communal life from which they had been barred on account of their malady. We also know that Jesus did all this healing out of love and compassion for those who suffered.

Let us prepare our hearts and minds for the reading of Holy Scripture, by singing together the second verse of "Open My Eyes, That I May See."

MUSICAL MEDITATION "Open My Eyes, That I May See" (v. 2)¹ Scott
(Words with music printed on back of bulletin)

*O-pen my ears, that I may hear voic-es of truth thou
Send-est clear; and while the wave-notes fall on my ear,
Ev-ery-thing false will dis-ap-pear.
Si-lent-ly now I wait for thee, read-y, my God, thy will to see.
O-pen my ears, il-lumine me, Spir-it di-vine!*

SCRIPTURE READING Michael Stuber

Mark 1:29-39 "Jesus Heals Many People"

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

¹ Text and Tune: Clara H. Scott. Public domain.

What did you learn about traveling people growing up?

It would be interesting to poll the congregation today and see what we would learn. To get the conversation going, I'll share a few remembrances.

My family basically didn't know people who traveled. We were farmers. Farmers don't travel unless they are retired or have lots of family who can help them. It's a big deal to find people who can do your chores even for one night, let alone several days. So we didn't go anywhere, and it was rare for us to have overnight visitors. In fact, we hardly ever had people drive up on our place who we didn't know or weren't expecting. So travelers were an oddity for us at best.

As children, we were taught that travelers were suspicious and that their identities and purposes needed to be vetted. I recall being told that there were essentially three kinds of travelers who might appear at our place:

- There were the sales people who might have something that you needed like the Fuller Brush man or the Watkins man.
- There were sales people who might be selling something that you didn't need, like insurance.
- And there were people who passed through on motorcycles who might be bringing trouble.

I'm pleased to report that my views on a lot of things have evolved since childhood, including my views about people who ride motorcycles.

III

As I began to think about today's worship service, particularly in conjunction with our "Biker Blessing," I had some fun reimagining the gospel lesson, and developing what I think of more as a guided meditation for today's sermon rather than as a conventional sermon. So today I want to take you on a little metaphorical ride down an imaginary road that, though imagined, is filled with illumination and truth about the living, loving God whom we worship.

Imagine with me if you will, Jesus living today as an itinerant teacher and healer. Imagine him, not as a man in ancient Mediterranean dress with a long flowing robe, head covering, and sandals, but as "Biker Jesus," as a guy decked out in leather and boots, driving a Harley, and leading a 12-step group.

Imagine Jesus taking his message of a Higher Power on the road, driving out the demons that feed people's addictions, and teaching step-by-step how to work the program, so that addicts might one day enjoy the blessings of life that God intended.

Imagine, too, Jesus being seen as suspicious and as a novelty to persons who were first learning about his healing ministry.

Imagine people who have long histories of addiction — people who have tried many times before to get off of booze or dope — and who have fallen off the wagon not once or twice, but multiple times. Imagine further how hard it would seem to stay the course — to stay in treatment — even with this new guy's approach.

Dare to imagine a man who is not only concerned about the addicts, but about those who are entangled in the addict's addictions, those whom 12-steppers call "co-dependents." Imagine that Jesus has come to your town — to our town — to not only tell you and others that life doesn't have to be like this, but to also show and tell you how your own behavior might be a deterrent to another getting well, and how there may be some ways that changing your behavior could make your whole family and community healthier.

Along the way, Biker Jesus bumps into numerous people who resist the program, including the following:

- There are those who love their addiction too much to give it up, who are so far gone that they've lost their capacity to choose a different way of life.
- There are those who don't believe that they're worth saving, who hope that the opiate that they are on will bring their whole miserable lives to an end.
- There are those who have tried other cures — and those who have supported persons in recovery before — who have bought into other programs (literally or metaphorically) only to have their hopes raised, their fortunes spent, and their hearts and pockets left empty.

These examples and more remind us of why folks are cautious about new guys in town like Jesus.

Still despite our caution, Jesus comes to our town, and he heals people, because that is what he came out to do, Mark says. He comes despite the resilience of our diseases and doubts, and he preaches and teaches the same message that he delivered in the last town. The message is a simple one, but oh so hard for us to believe. The message is this: God loves you.

That's it. That's step one in Jesus' treatment plan — hearing and believing the good news that God loves you.

It takes years for this message to sink in. Don't expect to believe it instantly. Don't expect that hearing it only once or twice will be enough. Expect that you, that others, will need to hear it for the rest of your lives. But at least today could be a start. Today could be the first day of the rest of your life. Today could be the first day that you dared to let yourself believe that you are God's beloved child, that you are loved just the way you are, and that God wants oh so much better for you.

When we can begin to hear these words and dare to begin to trust them in our heart of hearts, then everything else that God would hope for us becomes possible. We become able to take a hard look at our addictions, and our co-dependencies, and to begin to imagine and learn new behaviors that keep us from enjoying the fullness of life that God intends for us.

Oh, and there's one more thing. Notice how Jesus' healing restores people to community. In biblical times, people were terrified by illness and disease. Persons who could not be cured presented a threat to their loved ones and communities, both morally and practically. Morally speaking, sick people were considered unclean and were barred from the Temple, and from all religious services, so in a sense they were barred from mainstream access to God, who would be a source of healing in their lives.

Their uncleanliness jeopardized the status of their family members and friends, so that the diseased were often banished to the outskirts of their villages and cities and lived in the ancient equivalent of quarantine camps.

Though we are more sophisticated about disease and contagion today, addicts and their loved ones — and persons with a wide range of health issues even in our time — often experience a sense of isolation or even ostracism from the rest of their community on account of the disease that plagues them or those dear to them.

So imagine how remarkable it is that this Jesus, Biker Jesus, comes to their club meetings, and rather than telling them to get out of town, he invites them to be his traveling companions. He shows them — shows you — the path toward freedom and healing, and invites you to return to your community, and to lead and heal where you have been banished.

Imagine that. Imagine Biker Jesus has come to your town. Do not let him pass you by.

* **HYMN**

“Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior”

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