

Epiphany Four B - 2/1/09
St. David's

There's something about the spectacle of today that has been mildly nagging me all week. I've had no time to get introspective about this gentle irritation, but as I immersed myself in the process of sermon preparation, the Holy Spirit came with an answer. She whacked me, as she so often does, in the middle of my shower. It was there that I had a sudden realization.... I am old. Now this may not sound like a news flash to you, but it surprised the heck out of me. How did the Holy Spirit help me understand my plight? Well, as I thought about today, I was suddenly horrified. That's because I remember a time when today did not exist. Yes, St. Davidite's, it is true. Your Rector is so ancient that I remember a time when there was no Super Bowl Sunday.

I am sure your overwhelming emotion right now is pity for me. But I ask you to let that feeling go. Because in the process of writing this sermon, I had, as we would all hope during this season, an actual epiphany. I came to terms with my fossilized self when I realized that advanced age offers something more than the hackneyed experience and maturity. It gives us vision to see beyond a single worldview.

Let me give you an example. A few years ago, I preached a sermon where I suggested that there was a shift happening in the religious landscape of America. When I was a young adult, religious conservatism was a closeted movement. If you were a fundamentalist, you believed that the world was out to get you, so you barricaded yourself off from society to protect yourself. But I saw their worldview

completely change. Not only did they come out of the closet, (though perhaps they did not phrase it using that term), but they became the dominating force in American religion and politics. I reported to you a few years ago, that I saw this societal change reversing. And now, in the age of Obama, a complete cultural shift has taken place. Yes, we still have a few Pat Robertsons out there, but they are a dying breed and their influence on society has very much diminished.

A similar cultural shift has occurred in American political rhetoric. Over the span of my lifetime, I have watched the two political parties in this nation become increasingly more polarized, and discussions around any number of social issues become more and more acrimonious. This reached a climax over the last four years, as we have watched people on different sides of virtually any issue get to the point where they could not even talk to one another. But for the first time in recent memory, people are attempting to find common ground on the most divisive issues. Yes, we still have blowhards like Rush Limbaugh attempting to turn this country back to hatred and division. But the Rushes of the world have far less influence than they did even a few years ago and I believe their time in the spotlight is near an end.

My decrepitness has also allowed me to see a similar shift in the age of the American religious event known as... the Super Bowl. Before it existed, there was, of course, still a championship game in football. But that game did not contain 1/20 of the hype that surrounds today's event. That is not to say it was not full of drama and excitement. The 1958 NFL championship game between the New York Giants and the Baltimore Colts is still referred to as The Greatest Game ever played with good reason.

The difference is, the reporting of the game was actually about the game. Today, with the amount of media coverage for the Super Bowl 100 times what it was then, reporters are forced to embellish their coverage to nearly ridiculous levels. Short, concise and to the point journalism has been replaced by what the late basketball coach Al McQuire used to call french pastry.

We see this Super Bowl effect not only in the reporting of the game, but the game itself. When Alan Ameche scored the winning touchdown in that 1958 championship, the Colts quietly walked off the field, doing little more than shaking one another's hands. Today, the Super Bowl effect has created a game where defensive lineman do a dance on the field after sacking the opposing quarterback, even when their team is losing 42-7. This french pastry is so prevalent that the NFL was forced to institute a new penalty for "excessive celebration."

We, of course, see the Super Bowl effect way beyond football. It permeates every aspect of the culture. The move away from concise journalistic reporting is seen every night on television news shows, which often are not really news at all. For example, Countdown on MSNBC and The O'Reilly Factor on Fox News, are so full of french pastry that it is often impossible to separate meaning from commentary. We see the same phenomena on the internet. Blogging has become all the rage, where the standard rules of journalism no longer apply and people can write all the french pastry that they want.

The Super Bowl effect has culturally moved us light years away from the old school journalistic rule which stated that a good news story was one that told us who,

what, where, why, when and how in 25 words or less. In those days before the Super Bowl, there was also a tv show that captured the heart of our culture's approach to life. Remember Dragnet? What was Sergeant Friday's favorite line?... "Just the facts, maam." Because of the Super Bowl effect, virtually no one just reports the facts anymore.

Having the opportunity to see this cultural shift has helped me tremendously in understanding what is going on in today's Gospel. We are presently in lectionary year B, which means that most often we get our lesson from the Gospel of Mark. Last week, we heard about Jesus choosing fishermen as his disciples. Today we hear the very next story from the beginning of this Gospel.

What I think is most important in interpreting Mark is the realization that he is a pre-Super Bowl journalist. Matthew, Luke, John and many other Gospels that did not make it into our canon are all post Super Bowl Gospels. They were all written well after Mark, in another cultural time. All of those Gospels have lots of french pastry, not unlike our "news" reporters today. Mark however, is an old fashioned journalist. He wrote in the days of the NFL championship. Sergeant Joe Friday was a disciple of Mark. "Just the facts, maam."

Consequently, Mark's Gospel is far shorter than the rest. It is, in fact, half the length of its closest competitor. Mark continually takes us right to the chase, leaving out french pastry like Jesus' birth and many of the other stories about Jesus found in the other Gospels. That's why Mark's favorite word is immediately. "And immediately, the fishermen followed him. And immediately, they went to Capernaum." What this

means is that if Mark includes a story about Jesus in his text, we best pay attention, because he believes it is critically important.

The story we just heard not only makes the cut into Mark's Gospel, but it is the first official preaching that Jesus does in this book. I cannot help but believe, that Mark sees what happens today as the primary clue to understanding Jesus.

And what is it that Jesus does? He enters the synagogue and he...*teaches*. For Mark, EVERYTHING that Jesus does, the healings, the exorcisms, the prophecies, the feeding of the multitudes, the lifting up of the lowly, are included in his story, not to prove to us that Jesus is divine, but rather to prove to us that Jesus is the most authoritative teacher of all time. Unlike in the Gospels to come, Mark rarely uses french pastry to refer to Jesus. He doesn't call him Mighty Counselor or Prince of Peace. He calls him Rabbi, teacher. And therein lies the Epiphany for me in today's Gospel. It's not about the miracles themselves. It's about what Jesus teaches us through them.

Mark's reporting is so short and succinct, that he does not even tell us what Jesus taught in the synagogue. But he does provide us with enough information to discover the all important message ourselves.

The first thing we learn is that the people were astounded at his teaching because Jesus taught "as one having authority", not as the scribes. As usual with Mark's sentences, there is a lot happening in those few short words. First of all, we recall that people in the first century who acted out of character with their social caste, were immediately seen as a threat to the whole system. It was a little bit like how we

felt at one of our first inquirer's classes years ago when an inebriated fellow walked in and joined the conversation. We didn't know exactly what to do because this gentlemen had broken the unspoken social code.

That is what is going on when Jesus, a carpenter's son, stands up and starts speaking in a synagogue. He was doing something beyond what his social caste allowed. But instead of throwing him out to protect themselves, the congregation embraces what he is saying. Why? Our clue comes when Mark tells us that he doesn't teach like a scribe. Scribes are those people who have devoted their lives to copying the Torah and committing it to memory. Their job is to remind everyone by quoting biblical verses the importance of respecting the purity codes. Keeping people within their social caste and also removing any people from society who were ritually impure (like people with leprosy, people that were not physically whole, people with unclean spirits, those who had eaten impure foods, etc.) That's what all those laws in the Torah are all about.

So when Jesus starts speaking in the synagogue, he has, by his action, already broken the code. And then, when he speaks without quoting all those laws in the Levitical code, he is obviously teaching a very different message than anyone has ever heard before in those hallowed walls. My best guess is that he suggests just what he will go on to teach throughout his ministry. It is not our job to separate people into castes or remove impure people from our midst. Instead, Jesus says, we are to let everyone in.

The scribes authority comes from the authority of the Bible. It is a derived

authority. But Jesus EARNs his authority by living it. He doesn't just say that the kingdom of God is more about including others rather than excluding them, he does it immediately. He breaks the purity code in the Torah, right there in the middle of the synagogue.

That is what is going on when Jesus chases that demon from the man's body. When we hear the story, we think that this is all about Jesus proving to the crowd his power by performing a miracle. But in reality, there were a number of individuals in the Hellenistic world who could exorcize demons. For Mark, the important thing is that this act makes Jesus' *teaching* about inclusion credible. To make his point, Jesus is willing to battle it out with an impure force, even though he is breaking the purity commandments to do so. He breaks the law so that he might bring life back to a man who had been ostracized by the religious authorities. Jesus earns his authority to be a teacher by bringing full life to the gentlemen who has suffered with an impure spirit.

That is why Mark believes that Jesus is, first and foremost, a teacher. He is teaching a completely different way to understand how God works in the universe, and if we listen, it will change everything. He is suggesting that no matter how impure or evil someone seems to be, even if they are possessed of an evil spirit, we need to figure out a way to include them back into the church and society.

In those early, heady days of Christianity, it appears that this is exactly what the people of Mark's community did. Impure women were running churches. Black eunuchs were being baptized. People considered impure in the rest of the world were all being included into the Christian family.

But hardly another generation would pass when we started slipping back into the purity code. We hear that battle beginning in today's Epistle as people start getting hung up on eating meat sacrificed to idols. By the third century, today's teachings of Jesus had already been lost. The church began removing women from clerical positions. We would have a gigantic fight about whether we should let people back into the church who had recanted their faith. And then in the fourth century, we would create a whole new set of codes to decide who could be a Christian and who could not. Three hundred years after Jesus, and all the codes he had worked so hard to eliminate had all been put back in place.

It is this same return to the purity codes of the first century that continues to plague our churches today. The whole battle of women in the ministry is at its heart a purity issue. The uproar over homosexuality that divides our own church is nothing more than a return to the same purity laws in Leviticus. If Jesus was here in body today, I, along with Mark, believe that his first order of business would be to teach us once again how we must obliterate this way of thinking. It is one of the saddest commentaries on Christianity that many who are trying so sincerely to be faithful to Scripture, have ended up emphasizing the very parts of it that Jesus opposed.

When we forget this first lesson of our teacher Jesus, what we invariably do is trivialize religion. We become the scribal authority who makes sure everyone stays in the lines. We turn religion from inclusive compassion to exclusive separation and pain.

Sometimes, we need to get right to the facts. Sometimes we need to cut out the french pastry. By doing so, the author of the Gospel of Mark leads us to the ultimate truth that Jesus teaches. The time has come to put an end to purity codes forever. The time has come to recover Jesus, the teacher. Let us go forth and reclaim HIS vision of the kingdom of God, a place where no one need ever be separated from the love of God again. A place where each and everyone of us will be embraced for who we are, and encouraged to strive for who we can become. No french pastry necessary. Amen.