

**Epiphany 4B
Mark 1:21-28
January 29, 2012**

It's been a thrill a minute, hasn't it? These last few weeks as we have roared through the opening chapter of the gospel of Mark... First, Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized. Pow! Crash! Rip! The heavens are torn apart like an old sheet, and the voice of God comes rolling down to proclaim that Jesus is the Beloved Son. Then Jesus is off, preaching his way through the villages of Galilee saying, "the Kingdom of God is here. It's right next to you. It's all around you. Wake up! Pay attention! It's here!"

Then bam! He finds four fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Simon and Andrew and James and John, and whoa! They immediately get up and follow Jesus to become fishers of people. Then look! Already, Jesus is starting his ministry. Immediately, he gets down to business. We are only 20 verses into the first chapter of Mark and Jesus has already taken our breath away.

Whew. Let's sit down for a minute. Here on the bench in the little synagogue, the community center, as it were, of Capernaum. Take a breather. But uh oh ... Jesus is sitting down in the rabbi's seat, and you know what that means. We are off and running again. He's teaching, and it's nothing meek and mild. It doesn't even meet the most basic standards of good teaching. Jesus isn't citing his sources. He's not quoting experts in the field. Where's his research? Where's the peer review?

No, he's teaching with authority. The authority of one who already lives in the Kingdom of God, the authority of one who knows its ways and its promises and its blessings. The authority of one who can tear open the boundaries between people and God and bring that Kingdom to life, right here, right now.

And look out! Right on cue, here comes a boundary violator. In the middle of the Sabbath, in the middle of the synagogue, comes this awkward, awkward man. This socially inept man. This mentally ill, or confused, or addicted man. Is he a member of the congregation? We don't know. A guy off the street? We don't know. Is he even a Jew? We don't know that, either.

All we know is that his spirit is unclean. He shouldn't even be in a holy place. And there he is. The Other. The guy you don't want interrupting your worship. The guy you don't want sitting in your seat.

What do you do when the veil is torn and the results of that tearing bring you people like this? When the boundary between us and them, between me and you, between our community and this guy – what do you do when the boundary is ripped apart, and the same Kingdom of God that is pouring through the gap between God and humanity carries along with it, on its racing tide, a man like this man?

You can do a lot of different things. I know. I have seen it happen.

About 20 years ago, long before I was ordained, a woman came to the church I attended. She lived in the subsidized apartments across the street from our church. She had cerebral palsy and had a motorized wheelchair. She also had some kind of a seizure disorder, so she always wore a big white golf ball helmet in case a seizure flung her from her chair.

Her name was Laura. And she made her presence known. She shouted out loud during the prayers. She asked inappropriate questions during the sermons. And if the sermon went on too long, or if Laura felt like it was just too boring to tolerate one minute longer, she would have a seizure. And the service would stop dead, and someone would call 911, and the EMTs at the fire station the next block over would say, "We were just there last week. What's going on at your church anyway?"

What WAS going on at our church? Lots of things. Lots of ideas about what to do with Laura. Some folks thought she shouldn't be there at all. Others thought she should get an aide or an employee from the apartments to sit with her through the service. Others thought it wouldn't be nice or Christian to say anything at all, and we should just put up with it until she got sick of us and went away to challenge the folks at some other church.

Thank God Jesus finally showed up. Lord knows what we would have done with poor Laura if it had been up to us. But the encompassing, exorcising, healing spirit of Jesus entered our midst and inspired us at last to a new way of thinking about Laura.

Instead of treating her like an outcast or an irritation, we started treating Laura like a brand new member of the church. We gave her a job. We made her an usher. Every Sunday, she sat at the door of the church with a lap full of bulletins to distribute. And once she had a job, once she had a purpose, Laura stopped. She stopped yelling during the service. She stopped having seizures when the sermon went on too long. And then Laura started. She started talking to people. She started singing along with the hymns. She started helping people find their way to coffee hour in the Undercroft.

Laura stopped being a problem. She became a person.

There are all sorts of people in the world who are problems. Or who we think are problems. Or they are problems to us. They don't necessarily have illnesses or disabilities. They might just be different. Or they might just be irritating. They might violate our personal standards for conduct or clothing. Or they might just be that one person in the world who is way outside our comfort zone, but who turns up, over and over and over again, in the very places we consider safe or sacred.

But when the veil between God and humanity is torn apart and the Beloved Son of God comes into the room and sits down and starts to tell us what is what, there are no problems. There are only people. And Jesus looks at all of them, touches all of them, talks to all of them, welcomes them into his world, his Kingdom, where all are welcomed and none are despised.

We have been trying to live in that Kingdom place here at All Saints. For many years, this church as a whole and its members as individuals have stretched themselves to stand in this Jesus place, in the gap between heaven and earth. It is why so many of you love this church, because people like Mary Sharp, Sr., worked for open housing in East Lansing. Because clergy like Ted Rice were bold enough to bless same sex unions years before most other Episcopal clergy had the guts. Because this is a place where people could quietly change gender and still be loved. Where a single mom from Haven House found a friend who helped guide her and her daughter into permanent housing and helped her get started at LCC.

That's the kind of place All Saints is. So when the vestry started working three years ago on this idea of radical welcome, we almost wondered: why bother? We at All Saints already know how to embrace the Other and how to work for justice and how to make a space for a small child or a frail elder.

But the vestry also looked at this parish and realized that we have not fully lived into God's dream for this parish. We do not yet look like even our surrounding community, much less the multi-faceted Kingdom of God. Despite our commitment to inclusion and equality, we are still not as diverse as we might think. The median age of our surrounding communities is 38 – but here at All Saints, two-thirds of our active parishioners are over the age of 50. In the city of East Lansing, 76 percent of the people are white. At All Saints, this parish is 93 percent white. And while we are open, affirming, and accepting of our LGBT members, they only make up 5 percent of our congregation. Basically we are 95 percent straight, 93 percent white, and 66 percent over 50 years old.

And God's Kingdom is bigger and wider and weirder and more complex than that. We've got the right idea. We've made a great start. But we're not there yet.

We have work to do. And I believe that the challenge for this parish is to push its comfort zone even wider and to walk even further into that great big expansive Kingdom. This is a great church and it would be so easy to rest on our laurels. A few weeks ago, when I described this parish to a colleague in my doctoral program, she was so envious. Because her church is an upscale, uptight, wealthy, white parish in the middle of Virginia and no one is getting welcomed there who doesn't already live in their upscale, uptight, wealthy, white zip code. She thought All Saints sounded like a dream come true. So it would be so easy, so, so easy for us – even for me -- to buy into that image, and to tell ourselves how awesome we are, and not to change a thing.

But God's Kingdom is bigger than that.

This fall, we started to do intentionally the thing we already know how to do instinctively ... to welcome each person as Christ. We have started the Teen After School Program, and our Undercroft and lower level rings with the shouts and laughter of young people each Monday and Tuesday afternoon. They are not what we are used to, with their multicolored hair and elaborate piercings and their energy and drama. But they are our children, and they are Jesus' children, and we love them. A year ago, this TASC program was just a wild proposal. But in past five months, it has become a living, growing thing. It is a sign of Christ in our midst, incarnate and active.

But our challenge in the year ahead to go big. Bigger. Our challenge is to spread Jesus' radical welcome wider. To look around and see who is not in our midst. To seek out the lost and the lonely and the stranger, the people who don't look like us, or think like us or speak like us, and invite them into our family, into Jesus's family. To take the love and acceptance and friendship that we already know how to offer and spread it.

To spread it. Spread it wide. Spread it wider. Spread it like Jesus, up there ... with open arms.