

THE SCHOOL OF LOVE
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February 1, 2009
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

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My twin granddaughters got their first taste of solid food last week. Paula and I saw that historic moment on a video clip. To tell you the truth, the stuff didn't look very solid but for the first time nourishment was delivered to them on a spoon and not through a nipple. Parents and grandparents were so thrilled you'd had thought the twins had just graduated from Harvard.

Paula and I replayed the two-minute clip several times. In slow motion! One twin licked her lips deliciously. The other screamed bloody murder.

The grooming of a human being, as you know, takes time and patience. Pretty soon those little girls will hear: *Here comes the momma bird to feed the baby bird* and then right into their unsuspecting mouths—SWOOSH—a spoonful of peas. UGH. The grooming of a human being takes time and a little trickery!

One day those girls will be off to school to encounter sandbox etiquette, the rules of grammar, multiplication tables, social studies, and chemistry. Eventually they'll pass through the school of hard knocks. They'll be hurt again and again by friends, foes, and strangers. They'll create defense mechanisms and adopt prejudices and fears. They'll claim their parents are tyrants and that life is unfair. In a word: they'll discover that life is hard, sometimes very, very hard. But with any luck they'll also discover that grace abounds.

Life is hard and fraught with fears. According to some psychologists, humans are born with only two natural fears: the fear of loud noises and the fear of falling. Every other fear is learned from parents, peers, mentors, church, and society, including the fear of "the other" and the fear of being unloved.

Slowly over time, crippling attitudes and behaviors become inscribed on our minds, in our hearts and within our bodies. *Those people are no good*, a voice says. Another voice says, *You're no good, you don't deserve to live. You're good for nothing unless you prove yourself to be worthy.* We are so impressible and first impressions can be lasting impressions. Deeply etched impressions.

No one escapes unharmed.

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes, which is to say, those who inscribe things on our minds. Just then in their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit, yelling, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" This "us" as we find out later in the gospel of Mark, is the collective voice of the scribal class, those who indoctrinate minds and hearts. The scribal class fears losing control over people.

Have you come to destroy us?

Jesus once walked along the shores of Galilee and invited a few fishermen to join his school of love. *Follow me and I will teach you how to gather people into a Beloved community, into a new*

way of being and living in this world. Their first stop was a synagogue but it could just as well have been a mosque, madras, temple, church, club house, parochial or public school just about anywhere.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

That was then. This is now.

Over time the historic Jesus has become an evolving icon of love, a spirit that outlives every inscribed word ever written about him. It's what, in part, we mean by the Resurrection—Christ, the Beloved, present everywhere, in the breaking of the bread, in the sharing of the cup, and within the broken but beloved community that gathers round the Table.

Gospel stories such as the one before us this morning awaken us to the voice of love within and around us calling us to become fully human, to live in true communion with God and in true community with others. One of the first lessons in the school of love is that certain inscribed notions, attitudes and behaviors cripple us and others and must be dislodged—forcefully, if necessary. Everything is not condoned in the school of love.

Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out.

This past week I finished reading *America's God* by Mark Noll. It describes the various religious beliefs and institutions in America from 1720 up to 1860, the beginning of the Civil War. In hindsight it's shocking that so many Christians had used the Bible for hundreds of years to justify the maintenance of slavery.

Hundreds of ministers and theologians plus thousands of pious and devout church going Christians studied and pondered *hundreds* of Bibles verses from Genesis through Revelation pertaining to slavery and concluded that it was God's will for certain people, specifically white people, to enslave black people. Why? *For the Bible tells me so.*

That conviction became inscribed in a near cultural consensus, as did the prohibition against women voting or serving as ordained leaders in the church. No women allowed. Why? *For the Bible tells me so.*

As we now know, the Spirit eventually melted hard hearts and minds. The authority of love prevailed over inscribed dogma. The church repented and turned around.

These days seven Bible verses are being used to prevent otherwise qualified gay and lesbian persons from serving the church as ministers, priests, elders and deacons. Why? *For the Bible tells me so.*

It's true: the Bible is authoritative for the church but it is not the sole authority. It must be respected as we respect our grandparents, flaws and all. But we must not worship it. At our best we pay very close attention to the voice of Scripture but we pay even closer attention to the Spirit and Light of Christ speaking through the lives of our many brothers and sisters.

Spirit of the Living God

Spirit of the living God,
Fall a-fresh on me;
Spirit of the living God,
Fall a-fresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, Fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God,
Fall a-fresh on me.