

**“Unclean”**  
**January 29, 2012**  
**Grove Presbyterian Church**

**New Testament Lesson**

**Mark 1: 21-28**

It's been one of those weeks.

Early in the week, in order to get a jump on things, I had crafted an absolutely brilliant sermon addressing the burning and pressing philosophical issue of God and nature: is God revealed by nature? Can you discover the divine in a walk in the woods?

But then.

But then.

I wasn't sure if this really was preaching or feeding my vanity.

Got to speak words from heart to heart.

I'll save my brilliance for a rainy day.

Besides, a few things happened this week that makes someone in my spot reconsider what is really needed.

- ◆ Little Jeremy Marks and his high fever.
- ◆ Ed interested in what his death will be like
- ◆ Me wondering if I'm just going through the motions.
- ◆ Our cat getting diagnosed with AID's and now buried in the rosebed (you just know that after I'm dead my wife is going to become the cat lady of Maple Street).

More than those winter blues and blahs?

And then the kicker, just to kick 'em while he's already down: our church annual report.

Like a lot of you running on empty out there (you know who you are), the Annual Report targeted a few areas where we're running on empty, feeling frayed, threadbare, worn out, arthritic:

- ◆ Struggling with nursery volunteers...and coffee hour volunteers
- ◆ Keeping up with the budget...
- ◆ My own casual efforts to follow up on newcomers...

- ♦ Worried about church cliques that make it difficult for newcomers to break inside and get involved – which itself is a problem thinking that new people have to break in...

And then the real bummer of data that hurts and worries me the most: church worship attendance. Worse since I came here in 1989. And this with us really trying hard to refresh our worship experience with new energy, make worship more engaging, and this considering that I'm right now at the top of my game.

- ♦ Emotionally discouraging
- ♦ Spiritually disconcerting
- ♦ Intellectually disturbing
- ♦ Professionally disappointing

After all, it is all about me.

Time to brood and stew, time to prayerfully consider what this means for us. And Thee is far more important than me. Is this a cathartic moment?

My brain can explain the attendance figures – very erratic with great highs yet lower lows, some Sundays on holidays, floods, overworked moms and dads, worn out families, lots of traveling, babies born. I can rationalize it (I'm very clever at rationalizations), but the numbers sure still break my heart.

Now, after I preached this this morning, David Franklin came up and corrected me, because he wanted me to watch out focusing on numbers. He said that in so many ways Grove is deeper and more engaged in the last ten years than he's seen it before. There's less auditing of Christianity, he wanted me to know.

Sure, there's much good and exciting happening:

- ♦ Van and Brian and the opening exercises for church school
- ♦ A bus full of carolers
- ♦ Active Middle School Fellowship
- ♦ Great music
- ♦ Smart and committed confirmation class
- ♦ Increased visitation care-giving by deacons (although no good deed goes unpunished as we may be raising too many expectations - church business always seems to be a matter of high expectations and thin resources...or maybe that's just life?)
- ♦ Terrific improvements of our property
- ♦ Elaine Berberich's baby baskets (love the little booties)
- ♦ Revitalized Adult Church school
- ♦ And my favorite: the special education Transition Program with learning disabled students of Danville School District moving into the Hackey House 5 days a week (give yourselves a round of applause for that one!)

We learn to live with the choices we've made.

Sat in the waiting room the other day at Dermatology. Giggly place over there. A Lady there waiting for her husband to get his nose excavated remarked on all the pretty paintings and how calming how soothing they are – country landscapes, covered bridges, ponds, and such. My own imp of the perverse made me laugh under my breath imaging that if this waiting room were my soul, I just might have a different gallery of paintings on exhibition, the art gallery from the Twilight Zone. No covered bridges but:

- ◆ Edvard Munch's "The Scream"
- ◆ Picasso's "Guernica" and the firing squad
- ◆ Thomas Eakin's "The Gross Clinic" operating on the poor guy's femur
- ◆ Caravaggio's "Salome and the Beheading of John the Baptist" (enough said)
- ◆ Hieronymus Bosch's "The Last Judgment" (doubly enough said)

~~~

Oh if only I had a magic wand!

- ◆ Pouf! No more basal cell carcinoma
- ◆ Pouf! 220 at worship every Sunday
- ◆ Pouf! Our line of credit paid off
- ◆ Pouf! For that matter, while I'm at it – my debts paid off too
- ◆ Pouf! Not to be selfish, your debts too
- ◆ Pouf! No more personal insults
- ◆ Pouf! All our babies healthy, happy, and safe.
- ◆ Pouf! No more loneliness, no more tiredness

But no magic wands.

All we have is words. Teachings. Words to put shape to hopes, ideas, thoughts, feelings.

Words are the only way we get to know each other. Only way we get to know Jesus.  
Only way we know ourselves.

No words, no community.

No words, no communion.

No words, no nothing.

No words, no past nor future

Without words, we am utterly alone. And that's a lousy place to be.

I guess since words were good enough for Jesus, they may be good enough for us too.

Even Jesus lacked a magic wand.

~~~

Discussing this Scripture passage the other day, listening to Jesus and this man with the unclean spirit, we started wondering if Jesus ever viewed any one as evil?

After all, our culture sure does. Busy naming people as evil, from columnists to commentators, from debates to old guys pontificating over coffee at Dunkin Donuts.

Doing a little Biblical leg work, I couldn't find anywhere in the gospels where Jesus views anyone as evil. There is one flash of a heavy handed reference when he talks about all of us as evil, but that's for exaggerated effect.

Instead of condemning people as evil, he's a bit more realistic and compassionate. Jesus sees us as damaged, hurting (whether we know it or not -- well, we may know it -- admitting it may be another matter).

People aren't evil. Nobody's evil. We may do evil things (for very justifiable reasons), but that's because we are contaminated by an imp of uncleanness. Jesus views us as unclean, as troubled by 'akathartos,' – impurity, distortion -- and what he wants is the chance to cleanse us, clean us up – literally, he wants us to go through a catharsis (which means cleansing).

Lots of uncleanness. Funny thing is how accustomed we become with being dirty. It becomes part of us. We accept it as who we are. We're more comfortable with our unclean identity than the possibility of getting a bath. After all, the water's cold.

The man with the unclean spirit who interrupts Jesus isn't evil. He's damaged. He's so damaged he really resents what Jesus is teaching and offering him. He's scared.

There's lots of us out there. In here. Jesus scares us because Jesus does more than spout tradition or quote the stale party line, he makes us respond to the new teachings he brings.

Did Jesus destroy the unclean spirit? No, messes always are present, always wanting to get us, taking different forms, especially when we listen to ourselves rather than him.

Jesus didn't destroy the uncleanness. But he did silence the malice and make it listen. He did pull it out of the man. Even it had to listen to the power and authority of the good word.

All we have is words. Words so we can know each other and know the divine. Words to put shape to our feelings, thoughts, ideas, hopes.

Funny thing: today, now that I take time to listen, that's plenty enough.

**Amen.**