

Called by God—Part 3
“Called to See the Bigger Picture”

OT 4B-18
 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13
 Mark 1: 21-28
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Spinning heads... bulging eyeballs... flashing lights... rattling walls... objects hovering mid-air... spirits speaking strange languages. The more bizarre, the better. That’s how Hollywood portrays it. And outside of Scripture, that’s just about all we have to go on. For who here has seen an exorcism? I haven’t. Just as few in our culture take exorcisms seriously.

So what are we to do with what we just read? Jesus casting an unclean spirit out of a person?

Remember, at this point in Mark’s gospel—still in the first chapter—only a few things have happened. Jesus has been baptized. He’s spent time in the wilderness being tested. And he’s called his first disciples.

This is where our lesson picks up... with Jesus just beginning his fledgling ministry. And what’s the very first thing he does? He heads to a town called Capernaum, and heals a man of an unclean spirit.

Well... actually, first he heads to Capernaum and begins teaching in a synagogue. Now that... we can relate to. It makes sense that Jesus would begin his ministry by teaching, right? Teaching people what faith looks like... what faith requires.

What doesn’t make sense is the man who enters the synagogue with what Mark calls “an unclean spirit.” The demon cries out from the man “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”

We can relate to Jesus’ baptism. We can relate to calling his disciples. But demons and exorcisms? Not so easy.

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Nor, by the way, is the issue Paul tackles in our first lesson (Lyn read for us) this morning. Now, our first lesson comes from a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to a church community he founded in a town called Corinth. Hence the name of the letter, Corinthians.

But it seems that, after Paul left town, a debate erupted in the Corinthian congregation over the issue of food. (But as Lyn shared in her introduction of the reading,) But it’s not just any ol’ issue of food, you see. The question dividing the Corinthian congregation, as strange as it might sound, is this:

Are Christians free to eat meat from animals that were slaughtered in pagan cultic rituals?

See... easy to relate too, right? I can't count the number of times I've been over at someone's house and had to ask them, "Has this meat your serving come from a cow that was slaughtered in a cultic rite?"

My sarcasm aside, this is actually one of those unavoidable struggles we find in reading Scripture written two millennia ago. Understanding how something written back there and then can still speak to people living in an affluent, American suburb in the 21st century.

So it's important we not only pay attention to our time and context, but also the time and context of the Corinthian congregation. They were a people living amid a Greco-Roman culture where the worship of idols—and sacrifices to idols—could be seen almost everywhere. To walk through the center of town was to pass multiple statues of idols that the pagan culture worshipped. So operating a business within this culture, or simply going to a friends' house for an evening could pit a confessing Corinthian Christian face-to-face with a meal containing the meat of an animal slaughtered in a pagan cultic ritual.

So a debate arose. Not between the Christians and non-Christians. But amongst the Corinthian Christians themselves. Many of them—who called themselves "knowledgeable" Christians—they believed food didn't affect one's relationship with God. So they argued it was perfectly fine to eat meat that had come from an animal sacrificed to an idol... because, frankly, who cares where the meat came from? "Since idols aren't real in the first place... it doesn't matter."

But other Corinthian Christians weren't so sure. After all, many of these new Christians had once worshipped the pagan idols before they came to faith in Christ. So how could it possibly be okay, they wondered, for them to keep on eating the meat killed for a god they no longer believed in? Wouldn't that be a step backwards into their old way of life that didn't reflect their new relationship with Christ?

Again, we might find the debate about meat silly today... but for the Corinthians, it was all too real... and all too painful.

So... in an attempt to put an end to the debate, they wrote to Paul, asking him to settle the issue once and for all.

And this... this is what Paul says.

"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." I love that line.

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He explains, "If you wanna dig down into the specific nuances of the law, the knowledgeable Christians are right. Since idols aren't real in the first place, Christians can eat meat that was sacrificed to an idol." He says, "Food will not bring us close to God."

But lest the knowledgeable Christians feel vindicated... Paul goes on. "But listen up you all. This whole debate about meat misses the point. The point of our faith isn't knowledge... or having the exact right beliefs. The point of our faith is love. After all," he writes, "not everyone in the community shares the same knowledge. Some members are so accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, that they *can't* eat the idol meat without conjuring up the whole symbolic world of idol worship."

So, Paul concludes, “If food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.”

Or, in a much simpler way of putting it, Paul says, “It’s more important to be loving than it is to be right.”

Did you hear that? Because our culture sure doesn’t believe it.

It’s better to be loving than it is to be right.

Offering compassion is more important than proving a point.

Giving grace is more important than winning the battle.

So if being right causes another harm... then Paul says, “I don’t need to be right.” If proving my point causes another to stumble... then I won’t prove my point. And while I can certainly eat meat if I so choose... I’m not about to do so if I think for one second it would harm a brother or sister in Christ. For love is more important than being right.”

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In a former church I served, we had recently covenanted to care for creation in an intentional ways. But we didn’t really know where or how to begin. So we united with an organization called GreenFaith who helped guide us along the journey. A speaker from GreenFaith came to lead a forum for us—lifting up intentional ways in which we as a church and we each as individuals could make a meaningful difference in our fight to care for creation.

The speaker, Cindy, was great. She talked to us about all sorts of issues and really educated me, I know, on things I’d never realized before. One being the issue of methane gas in our environment. She explained the role scientists believe methane is playing in climate change, and then pointed out the number one contributor to methane in the world. Do you know? ‘Cause I sure didn’t. Cows. Cattle. Or, really bluntly, their flatulence. Our appetite for meat leads ranchers to raise more cattle, who then eat more grass, who then expressing more methane into the environment.

I remember being stunned. But I also remember thinking to myself, I’m not ready to become a vegetarian. Thankfully, Cindy didn’t urge us do that. Instead, she encouraged us to try going meatless for just one day a week—and she told us the difference that going without meat for just one day a week would make.

Now... I want to be clear. Again, as Paul said, is eating meat unfaithful? No.

Do we have the right to eat meat whenever we want? Absolutely!

But if I can do something as simple as going meatless one day a week and help reduce the methane in the environment, I’m gonna do it. Not because I don’t have the right to eat meat... but because of my faith that our God is always calling us to look at the bigger picture. To look at not just at what we can do... but at what we should do... for the common good.

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Jesus makes clear it’s an inherent part of every call. And it’s the very thing he showed his disciples amid his very first act in Mark’s gospel.

For when that man with an unclean spirit entered the synagogue that day as Jesus was teaching, it happened to be the Sabbath. And according to Jewish tradition at the time, one could not do any kind of work on the day reserved for the Lord—not even healing.

But even more than that, men like this—one possessed by an unclean spirit—they were considered off-limits to rest of society. Which means this possessed wasn't just suffering from his affliction—he was also suffering complete and utter isolation and abandonment. He was the town degenerate. The reprobate... the outcast. I mean, you didn't pass this man by as you would today one on a city sidewalk. No... you crossed the street to get away from him.

Except... Jesus didn't avoid the man... or judge him in any way. Rather, when the man with the unclean Spirit spoke out in the synagogue, Jesus stopped teaching with his words... and began teaching with his actions.

He walked over to the man with the unclean spirit... and instead of condemning him and shooing him away as everyone else would've done, Jesus offered the man compassion and love. Jesus didn't care that society deemed it unacceptable to include such an outsider. Just as Jesus didn't care that religious law condemned healing on the Sabbath. Jesus offered him wholeness and healing anyway, casting the spirit out of the man, demonstrating to all what the kingdom of God is really all about it.

Jesus wasn't concerned with doing what society said was right. Nor did he worry what others might say about him. Jesus' looked beyond the immediate and saw the bigger picture—living out the love of God he had come to reveal.

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It's a lesson for all disciples today. While God calls each of us in unique ways... a common thread woven throughout every disciple's call is to see the bigger picture of God's kingdom. A kingdom that doesn't care who's smarter, who's more knowledgeable, or even who has the right beliefs. Rather, in God's kingdom we're called to pursue peace and justice for each and for all.

So may we, friends, strive to be those kinds of disciples—the kind who'd rather be loving than be right. The kind who look beyond what we can do, and see the love we're called to pursue. Amen.