

Sanctuary for the Weird

Mark 1:21-28

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This is one of those Sundays when I am glad we do not have an electronic billboard outside broadcasting the sermon title for neighbors driving by. I sure don't think I would have gotten "*Sanctuary for the Weird*" past the Hospitality Ministry, for all their evangelism efforts to welcome people to Shandon. But it was a sermon title inspired, frankly. Inspired not only by this text from Mark's gospel, in which an exorcism is Jesus' first public act after he calls the disciples, but also by something I heard recently from a child.

Two weeks ago National Public Radio broadcast its longstanding feature, "This I Believe," spoken that Sunday by a seven-year-old. Tarak McLain lives in Austin, Texas. He collects food for the homeless and raises money for orphans and impoverished schools. He likes to read about the world's religions, and he also listens to public radio. His NPR radio column on January 18th was entitled, "Thirty Things I Believe," and among them were these:

I believe God is in everything.
I believe we can help people.
I believe hate is a cause for love.
I believe we should be generous.
I believe I should not whine.
I believe people should wake up early.
I believe people should go outside more.
I believe people should use less trees.
I believe that God helps us to have a good time.
I believe we should help the poor.
I believe it is OK to die but not to kill.
I believe war should stop.
I believe we can make peace.

Not a bad list of beliefs for young Tarak McLain. But there was one belief that stood out from the rest, that sounded mature beyond the years of a seven-year-old, and which resonates so beautifully with our scripture reading for today. This seven-year-old also said, "I believe everyone is weird in their own way."¹

Now, *weird* is a popular word these days, and my guess is the members of the Confirmation Class who are leading our worship this morning, along with many others in our midst, are well acquainted with the word *weird*. According to our youth minister, Katy Schneider, if you listen to our youth, you will discover that most of us parents in this congregation are weird, really weird. But if any of you want to hammer someone with a palatable verbal insult, you might come up with another, because truth be told, weird is not such a bad word. Admittedly it has taken on negative connotations that are far from its roots, but weird comes from the same Old English word from which we also get the word *worth*, and literally means *fate* or *destiny*.²

Originally then, *weird* referred to persons *worthy of their destiny*. Not until the nineteenth century did it take on the connotations of “uncanny, odd, and strange,” and that was due to Shakespeare’s use of the word *weird* describing the sisters who confronted Macbeth about his destiny. So, given how often we hurl the word *weird* around these days, we would do well to remember that the most basic understanding of it is worthy, from which we also derive the word *worship*. “I believe everyone is weird in their own way” is not just an insightful affirmation of a seven-year-old, but if you consider the original meaning of the word, it is the truth of the gospel. Everyone is worthy of the destiny Jesus Christ intends for all.

Had they had the Old English language at their disposal, I imagine those hanging around the Capernaum synagogue with Jesus that day would have called the man with the unclean spirit *weird* – a misfit, odd, strange, out of his mind. Sick people like that, you see, did not normally enter the public place of worship. Folks went to synagogue pretty much the way folks come to church today. They might have cleaned up a bit before going, and they knew what to expect—the rabbi would read from the Torah and say some interpretive words. They would sing a couple of Psalms and recite familiar prayers, and all in all, going to worship had become quite familiar and habitual and rather ordinary.

But then there was this new rabbi passing through, this itinerate preacher and teacher on the scene named Jesus. There was something about him that commanded the attention of folks in a new way. He had authority, they said; he did not sound like the usual scribes and religious leaders. He had a presence about him, this Jesus, which recalled the promises of scripture that God would lift up in their midst a new prophet, a new kind of teacher who would speak the very words of the Lord God.

And so on this particular day in Capernaum, when Jesus was teaching as one with authority, something very unusual happened. Someone who was not supposed to be there, the man with the unclean spirit, came in. Surely those around would have called him *weird*. But Jesus looked at him as if to say, “No, he is not weird, rather he is worthy. He is worthy of the destiny God intends for all of humankind.” Jesus was showing them, in word and deed, that this demon possessed man belonged there, he was welcome among them in the synagogue and in the context of worship, he was healed. Jesus wants us to know that in this man’s weirdness lies his worthiness; he was at home in the place where people worship because he was in the presence of God.

Make no mistake about it. We will see Jesus go about his healing ministry in homes, beside the sea, at the foot of the mountain, in crowded city streets. But the first place he demonstrates his healing power is in worship, in the place where, whether we like to admit it or not, we all come seeking the healing presence of Christ. Robert Shaw was one of the great American choral conductors, and as the son of a minister, he was also a keen observer of what happens when we worship. He once said, “The absolute minimum conditions for worship are a sense of mystery and an admission of pain.” A sense of mystery and an admission of pain. Like the demon-possessed man in our scripture who cries out to Jesus for healing, so we too bring our pain, whatever it is – our need for forgiveness, our brokenness, our illnesses, our anxiety, our concern that we may not fit in. And by the power of God, Jesus Christ will take whatever it is that makes us weird and call us worthy. Whatever is odd and strange about us, whatever we think might set us apart from others, Christ takes and makes us acceptable in the eyes of God, wherever we are, but especially here in the place of worship.

Through long years in ministry I have discovered that a lot of us come to church thinking that we have to have it all together: that our life should be better balanced, that we should be more this or not so much that, that our faith should be stronger. When you think about it, we don't have any evidence of Jesus' engaging in conversation with folks who have it all together. He doesn't go up to the scribes in this text and say, "Let's talk about Torah – just those of us who are in the know." No, he is forever reaching out to the sick, the cast-off, the poor, the vulnerable. So if we want to have a holy encounter with God in this place, week after week, we do well to remember Jesus calls us to let our guard down, to come as seekers of healing to this sanctuary for the weird.

James Autry is a business consultant and poet who has written a little book called *Looking Around for God*. In one chapter, called "Chasing a Miracle," he begins by saying, "You don't think about miracles much until you think you need one." Then he recounts how he and his wife spent desperate years seeking help for their autistic son. Many of you here know something about that kind of miracle seeking. They took young Ronald to countless doctors from their home in Iowa to New York City. They tried a psychic healer; they tried horseback therapy with a specialist who used animals to help children with special needs. Finally it was an educator who provided more help than any other, and they threw themselves into supporting the public schools and their therapists, because along the way, Ronald began to show great signs of improvement.

Autry connects this experience to his faith saying, "With all that we tried, I believe we'll never know what worked and what didn't. Maybe none of it; maybe all of it, but I don't waste time anymore trying to analyze it. I do know that at some point, while chasing after the one big miracle, I finally recognized the real miracle workers and realized that miracles are happening almost every day, one person at a time, one teacher, one friend, one family member, one coach, one music teacher, one parent at a time."³

Friends, if we chase after the one big miracle, we might miss the little ones that happen every day. When Jesus stopped worship in the Capernaum synagogue to call a demon out of the possessed man, it was not simply "the one big miracle." He would go on to perform many more, and he still does. It is no small coincidence that it happened in the sanctuary, in the place of worship where people were intentionally gathered in the presence of God. He opened the doors to that sacred space wider than they had ever been flung open before. And he welcomed into his holy presence, not just for the first time, but forever, every odd, strange, ill, weird person whose destiny is now in his hands. He showed that man needing healing then, and he is saying to us now, "You are welcome here. Your weirdness simply makes you worthy of the life I intend for all."

What a day that must have been. What a day it is.

Notes

1. Tarak McLain, "Thirty Things I Believe," *This I Believe*, National Public Radio, 1/18/09.
2. John Ayto, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (New York, New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 570.
3. James Autry, *Looking Around for God: The Oddly Reverent Observations of an Unconventional Christian* Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2007).