

### **What is this?**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 28, 2018.

*What is this? A new teaching - with authority! Mark 1: 27*

Jesus spent much of his early ministry in the northern Galilee town of Capernaum. The name is derived from the Hebrew for village, kefar and the prophet Nahum for whom the town is named, making it kephar-nahum or Capernaum. The town is strategically located at the commercial and cultural crossroads along the Damascus highway that provides a natural means for Jesus' message to be spread far and wide. Cordial relations with the Roman government help make the city culturally and economically advanced. Those who come to hear him speak at the temple are astounded at the authority with which he teaches.

While Jesus is teaching, he is approached by a man with what was then referred to as an "unclean spirit." Belief in unclean spirits was widely believed in the ancient world and Jesus spent much of his ministry healing the sick and casting out such "demons." It is understandable that in ancient times it was thought those suffering from mental disturbance were possessed by a demonic inner force.

Modern day psychiatry would have a more sophisticated diagnosis of the condition of the man with malevolent spirits. Rather than ignoring him, Jesus rebukes the man's inner voices and orders them out, curing him of his affliction. As the crowd looks on with astonishment, they exclaim how Jesus even has authority over unclean spirits. If you've ever been with someone who appears to be conversing with inner voices, it is disturbing. What this story tells us is that evil forces of whatever kind must be confronted rather than ignored. It is important to know what is needed to treat such a condition. Those afflicted with this form of illness need compassionate care to enable them to cope with their oppressive inner forces. Religion and psychology are intertwined. There is a distinct difference between someone who has had a deeply spiritual experience and one who has had an emotional breakdown.

The one essential inner voice we have is an informed conscience. A good conscience is our best guide when we are confronted with ethical and moral choices. If we want to do what is right, we have to rely on our conscience to choose the harder right over the easier wrong. To give in to the temptation to do what we know is wrong without regard to the consequences is to refuse to listen to our inner conscience.

We rely upon our conscience to enable us to discern between what is right and wrong, true and false, selfish and unselfish. We have to beware of those in authority who try to use their power to control, manipulate and intimidate people. One of the tactics of a controlling and manipulative religious people is when you are in disagreement with them you are asked to pray about it until you see it their way.

If you did an inventory of personal demons, what would they be? One of them may be having difficulty with anger management resulting in inappropriate and unacceptable behavior. When anger becomes so intense and out of control it can result in spewing uncontrolled and unintelligible sounds. The damage done by uncontrollable anger holds the victim hostage to devastating humiliation.

This past week there was yet another school shooting in Kentucky that resulted in injuries and loss of young lives. This is just one more painful example of what happens when a disturbed person's anger is out of control. Fortunately, the students had been instructed to know what to do when there is an active shooter on the premises or there might have been greater injury and loss of life. We can't help but wonder what goes on in the mind of a young student who methodically fires his handgun at fellow students. There have been 283 such tragedies since 2013 and sadly such incidents of violence will continue as long as firearms are easily accessible to disturbed people.

If you know of any who have reached the point in their life where they don't know which way to turn, encourage them to get help. Your thoughtful and caring presence can make the difference to encourage them to find help they need.

There have been those in my life who have been of significant help to me in small ways that they may not remember, but I do. It may have been a suggestion or connection that pointed me in a direction that made all the difference in my life. I am grateful for their thoughtfulness and supportive kindness that provided help and direction when I needed it. Their helpful advice at the right time made all the difference.

We are citizens of the world as well as citizens of God's kingdom. Today, we are doing the business of the church at our 125th Annual Parish Meeting. We are electing new Vestry, reviewing and voting on our budget for 2018, and reviewing our life together as we go forward in Christian witness in West Roxbury since 1893. We are grateful for those dedicated souls in past generations who have been the spiritual link between the past and the present. We need to be strong in our own generation for those who follow in the future. None of what we do here can be accomplished without your commitment to work together for the common good. The emphasis woven throughout our strategic planning initiative has been to go from maintenance to mission.

The church's calling and mission is to reach out to the world beyond us. Our backpack project in the fall, preparing meals for the B-Safe program in the summer and at Epiphany School in Dorchester during the year are important priorities in doing God's work. We can do more. It is in reaching beyond ourselves that we find who we really are and what we can accomplish as the people of God in Christ.

We must not weaken in our resolve to make Christ's presence known in this community and beyond. That's our job. Let's do it!