

**Listening to the right inner voice**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 1, 2015.

*They were astounded at his teaching for he taught them as one having authority...and they kept on asking one another,  
"What is this?"*  
Mark 1:22, 27

Jesus spent much of his early ministry northwest of the Sea of Galilee in the town of Capernaum. The name of the town is from the Hebrew for village, kefar and the prophet Nahum, thus kephar-nahum or Capernaum. Capernaum is significantly located at a commercial and cultural crossroads along the Damascus highway, providing a natural means for Jesus' message to be spread far and wide. Because relations with the Roman government were cordial, Capernaum became a culturally and economically advanced city with the temple at the center of the religious life of the Jewish people. You can still see the remains of the temple where Jesus taught and astonished people with his authority.

On this occasion, a man with an "unclean spirit" approaches Jesus as he is teaching. It is important to point out here that "unclean" in this context refers to what is unholy rather than dirty or immoral. The man is not himself unclean, but is possessed of unholy inner compulsions and voices. Being possessed means that not even the words he speaks are his own. Modern day psychiatry would most likely diagnose him with paranoid schizophrenia affected by inner voices.

The man approaches Jesus and the inner voices ask him if he has come to destroy them. Jesus rebukes the "evil spirits" in the man and tells them to be silent and come out of him.

The departing spirits cause the man to convulse and he is cured. The people look on with amazement, exclaiming that Jesus has authority even over unclean spirits. He knew how to deal with demonic forces, having resisted his own temptations in the Judean wilderness before he began his ministry.

There were many notable figures in Biblical history that had their weaknesses and challenges. Jacob limped, Moses stuttered and Joseph was set upon and sold into slavery. Miriam had leprosy and Job lost everything he had including his ten children. Saint Paul endured great hardship on his missionary journeys despite his mysterious "thorn in the flesh." Peter denied knowing Jesus, Mary Magdalene had her demons, John the Baptist was beheaded and Stephen was put to death by being stoned. All twelve of the Apostles except for Saint John were martyred. Modern day prophets have inner struggles of which we are unaware who are willing to speak out boldly and directly to the issues of our time.

Today evangelical Christianity is out front and center as political candidates use the authority of obscure passages in the Bible to justify their stands on the issues of the day. Where once a candidate's faith was a private matter, now they cleverly blend their conservative politics with their fundamentalist beliefs. They question evolution, deny the reality of global warming and take a patronizing view of women. Calling someone a liberal has become a slur as right wing candidates gain strong followings creating a cultural and religious conflict between liberals, moderates and conservatives. John Kennedy in 1960 overcame the animosity toward Roman Catholic candidates that led to the defeat of Al Smith in 1928. Now conservative Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants join together to leave moderate voices all but ignored. I love tradition and I believe that traditions should be honored as long as they are not in conflict with Jesus' teachings about compassion for the weak and the oppressed.

The Bible needs to be rescued from those who take scriptural passages out of context to justify submission of women, corporal punishment of children and institutional racism. The irony is that those who favor less government advocate legislation that restricts personal lives. Issues such as abolition of slavery, voting rights for women and African Americans, desegregation of public schools and public accommodations, Social Security, Medicare, handicap access, concern for protecting the environment and same sex marriage were once considered radical that have become an accepted part of American life.

I am of the firm conviction that Jesus' teaching about compassion and justice still carries with it the authority to advocate for the voiceless and the protection of the vulnerable from exploitation. Though you may not be as articulate as you want when confronted on the spot, it is essential that we all speak up in the face of injustice. Otherwise, silence implies agreement.

Jesus often had to tell people what they didn't want to hear. He spoke with authority and would not compromise himself. He did not rely on public opinion nor did he fashion what he said to avoid rebuke or win popularity.

If our conscience is informed by our faith, it is important for all of us to think critically about how our faith can help set the agenda for what is right and just for all. Instead of being used to manipulate the minds of the voting electorate, faith should be a guide to an informed conscience that shapes a society that guarantees the rights and responsibilities for all.

We are all concerned about reducing the national debt, though not all agree on how to do it. The debt was largely caused by ill-advised and unplanned wars, greed on Wall Street and huge tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy. We need to listen to the inner voice of our conscience in search for ways to solve the deficit that doesn't penalize the elderly, the sick and disabled and the poor. Those who propose solving the national debt by taking from Social Security and Medicare need to remember that they will someday be old and possibly ill or disabled and would not want to find themselves without access to proper healthcare. There must be no deficit in our commitment to our military veterans and the aged and vulnerable among us. All of us as citizens of God's world bear the responsibility to do the right thing for the right reason. We all need to listen to the inner voice of an informed conscience to guide us to do what is right and just for all God's people.