

## **“For What Purpose is a Sunday/Sabbath?” – St. Mark 1:21-28**

*Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – January 29, 2012*

**Pastor Chip Winter**

Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. The text for our sermon is the Gospel lesson appointed for our worship service and already read for us from Mark’s first chapter.

My dear family in Christ, among the answers to the question **“why are you here this morning?”** were that posed to us, today, we would surely hear some saying **“I come for a time of quiet and contemplation; a time of centering serenity.”** If it were left up to us, that might be what we’re about.

But let us look at the example of worship in this text and see how instructive that might be. As a backdrop to the text, Sabbath was not only the day when Jewish people did not work; it was primarily the day that Jewish people set aside to be with God; to give themselves fully to the God who has so fully given of Himself to them.

That being the case is it surprising or to be expected that with Jesus teaching in the synagogue (a) the Sabbath service is disrupted as a demon-possessed man shouts out words of anger to Jesus, that (b) Jesus rebukes the demon, and then (c) the congregation is filled with shock and astonishment? Or, does that simply mean that we should expect that sometimes Jesus disrupts our plans for serenity? We keep having to learn and to relearn, in our discipleship, the adventure of attempting to worship and to serve a living God.

One of the, to my mind, troubling encounters our Lord has with someone who appears to hang on His every word is the exchange Jesus has with His mother, Mary, at the wedding in Cana. When she comes, out of the kindness of her heart, to let Him know that the hosts are in a pickle, having run out of wine for the reception, Jesus rather brusquely replies, **“What have you to do with me?”** Early on, I thought, is that any way to talk with your mother?

In a sermon on this text from John, Dr. Martin Luther suggested what a model teacher Mary was for us in this. **“She does not interpret this as anger, but adheres firmly to the conviction that He is kind, refusing to give up this opinion because of the thrust she received and unwilling to dishonor Him in her heart by thinking Him to be other wise than kind and gracious...ordering the servant to do what He might tell them, she proves that she has overcome the rebuff and still expects of Him nothing but kindness.”** (FATS, Vol. 3, p 262-3).

Ever feel like you’ve been in Mary’s shoes, rebuffed or put on a back burner by the Lord? Ever wonder, in the midst of crisis, or after hearing a tough lesson in our worship **“Why on earth did I come to church this morning?”**

Well, welcome to worship with Jesus. There are times when we are all settled in for Sabbath, neatly seated in our rows of pews, each one in our rightful spot, just following the order of worship. Just like last Sabbath, everything is proceeding decently and in order. And then Jesus shows up.

Worship is the center of the church. That’s not only because this is where most people enter our congregation (giving us a shot when they show up as visitors). It’s because worship is where the greatest number of us, at the same time, learn again or learn more of Who God in Christ Jesus is and what our God has in mind for us this week. As such, worship can be unpredictable, not because Susan Warneke, our music director, Jared Stiek, Pastor Rosenthal and I try to keep you on your toes,

but rather because true worship is a confrontation with the living God in Christ Jesus. Who would be more unpredictable than the God Who willingly ascended the cross to redeem the world back to Himself at the cost of His own suffering and death?

There is a danger of soft-selling this Savior. We may be tempted to urge people to come to worship, to be a part of us, on the basis of some other good than the good of being in the presence of the God Who has loved us unto death and Who is to be loved by us. **“The family that prays together stays together,”** it has been said – as if family unity is the purpose of coming before the Lord?

That is simply using God as a means to another end. In any sort of loving relationship, when that relationship is used to get something else, something other than that relationship, it tends to be abused.

The purpose of Christian worship is the supremely purposeless purpose of being with the God Who is determined to be with us, no matter the cost. Sometimes being with God is a pleasant, calming, comforting experience: sometimes it is not. But our purpose in reading from scripture, in laying ourselves open before the Almighty, in singing these hymns, in listening to a sermon is not first of all pleasure. It is to be with the God Who was nailed to a cross, Whose bloody sweat mingled with and formed mud in the dust below, Who breathed His last and was impaled to make certain He had died, Who was gently covered in a grave cloth and placed on the cold, cold stone, Who was entombed in darkness until He rose in triumph on that Easter Sunday morning. This is the One with Whom we have come to have fellowship – all on His behest.

Now Dr. Martin Luther is again sometimes quoted as having said that **“when the word of God is rightly preached, demons are set loose.”** And some can testify that there have been times when you have been in worship that your unleashed demons have whispered in your ear **“Wait a**

**minute! This isn't what I came here to hear. This is disturbing, even insulting. I'm not going to sit here and listen to this." Or, "What on earth does this have to do with me? How can I use any of this next week in my work."**

But, then again, some can also testify to the joy of learning, in the sermon or in a hymn or reading, that the gap between our ways and God's ways is wide indeed. God is not simply some extension of our ideas, not some tamed "go-fer" who exists to fulfill our every want and need.

When hands are laid upon us at Baptism and the Holy Spirit is involved, the trouble begins. God is neither a principle nor an idea. When God's word is preached Christ Himself walks through His congregation. God is a living, speaking, abundantly revealing, encroaching, frenetic, frequently disrupting presence Who, as with Jacob, sometimes in a sermon wrestles us to the ground, half-kills us blesses us and commanded us, and then steals back into the night as we limp away – when all we had in mind was a civil conversation.

This is the God Who reconciled us back to Himself at the great cost of His Son, so that our trespasses would not be counted against us. As we come into His presence, there are many things we need to learn and relearn.

In some congregations there are cloth bags in the narthex. On these bags you'll sometimes find the words "worshipper in training" printed. These bags often contain crayons and Bible coloring book pages, a Bible storybook and maybe a piece of candy – materials to keep the children engaged during worship.

That's a great phrase, isn't it? Worshipper in training. That really fits us, here, no matter our age or years of experience. All of us are worshippers in training. We are never so adept at being a Christian so wise and well grounded in God's Word, that we cease being surprised by this God Who has called us to be His own, to living in His kingdom and to serve Him in everlasting

righteousness, innocence and blessedness. We are worshippers in training here, where Christ came to be with us, so that we will be prepared to worship Him in God's presence on that day of Jesus' glorious return.

Amen.