

## **One Shabbat in the Synagogue**

January 28, 2018

Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka

Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church

Texts: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

*Shabbat Shalom!* This is how we were greeted on Friday, when about 16 of us went to worship with the Mt. Sinai congregation at the synagogue in Wausau on Friday evening for their annual Community Shabbat, a service welcoming non-Jewish friends, neighbors, and local church members – and we experienced a worship service full of joy. I think sometimes we Christians have gotten the wrong impression about the Sabbath – we think of it as a rule-driven, grim kind of ordeal – perhaps because of the Puritans and other conservative Sabbath observers, or perhaps because of the criticisms by some of the religious leaders of Jesus when he healed people on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is received as a gift, welcomed with joy. The service we attended was full of hugs, singing, laughter, and welcome. *Shabbat* is a time of joy, relaxation, praise, and celebration.

Abraham Joseph Heschel, a renowned 20<sup>th</sup>-century writer about Jewish spirituality writes that while the world is concerned with space, and things which take up space, Judaism is concerned with time. Indeed, the first thing that God designates as holy in the Bible is the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. And Heschel affirms that the Sabbath is, indeed, a day of joy. As I was going through the *Siddur*, the prayerbook, I couldn't find anything like a confession of sin. Heschel observes that, "The Sabbath is no time for personal anxiety or care, for any activity that might dampen the spirit of joy. The Sabbath is no time to remember sins, to confess, to repent or even pray for relief or anything we might need. It is a day for praise, not petitions." He even says that during periods of grieving, the grief should be set aside during the Sabbath. It is a day of delight – delighting in God and all that we have from God. It is a day of rest and renewal, of celebrating and praising God.

Now I can't tell you exactly how Sabbath worship was observed in the time of Jesus. It would have included a reading from the Torah scroll – a reading from one of what we consider the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – as we had a reading from Deuteronomy this morning. And what I can tell you is that modern Judaism has its roots in this same time period that Jesus was teaching. Modern Judaism grew up side by side with Christianity – both religions have their roots in early Judaism.

So turning to the story, Jesus and his disciples go into Capernaum – 9 years ago when I was in Israel I went to Capernaum. Capernaum is on the Sea of Galilee. And just off the lakeshore there is a house that tradition says was the home of Peter. Across from Peter's home is the synagogue. And then there is a main street with the ruins of small businesses along each side. When I visited there, the thing that struck me there was that it reminded me very much of Stevens Point. We, too, have a shore – the riverbank, and then a Main Street, with our church at one end. I felt very much that the early ministry of Jesus had

begun in a place very much like our own community. Most of Israel was very different from Wisconsin, but Capernaum felt like home.

So Jesus came to the synagogue, and the people were gathered to worship and learn together, and they were impressed at his teaching – as Mark and Phil pointed out – with authority! But not like the legal experts.

And then the worship was disrupted by this man and the unclean spirit. Can you imagine? But Jesus doesn't just see the disruption; he sees beyond the problem... to the person.

How often, when dealing with a difficult situation, do we identify a person as their problem? One of the challenges for ex-cons is that very problem. How would you like to be defined by your worst mistake? For most of us, life has held enough grace that our personhood accommodates our disappointments as well as our successes.

When in our lives have we lost that sense of personhood because of our problems – were we the kid in the class who was disruptive, and no one noticed the pain... just the problem? Are we the person in our family who has been assigned the blame for some situation that belongs to the family system? Were we ever in a job where a co-worker or boss decided we couldn't do anything right?

Where in our own eyes have we ourselves become just the problems that we struggle with? Have we been reduced in our own eyes to our body size, or our loneliness, or our aging, or our addictions, or the mental illness that colors every day – the depression, the anxiety, the obsessions and compulsions?

Who are the people in our community who have become just problems in our eyes – the homeless? Those with a DUI? Those who suffer with addiction? One of the great gifts that the staff and volunteers in the Warming Center here give to the guests is personhood – each person is welcomed, and accepted, and loved. The warmth is good, the beds are a relief, but can you imagine the difference that welcome makes to a person who has seen person after person turn aside when passing them on the sidewalk? What a difference, to be really seen, really heard, really known.

This is the gift that Jesus gave to the man in the synagogue – the healing was huge, but being seen was part of the healing. And perhaps this was what undergirded his authority – his words mattered to people because they could see that they mattered to him.

So often in the complexity of our world, it is hard to know what to do in following Jesus – but this is something that is very simple and clear: notice people, remember that each person is a person in their own right, not just a help or hindrance to us. This is at the heart of what Martin Buber discusses in his book *I and Thou*. Noticing each person so that they become a *Thou* and not just an *it*. One of the things Phil pointed out in the Gospel today was that Mark calls the unclean spirit was an “it” but the man was “he.” The person is more than his problem. And Buber reminds us that we bring our own whole being to “I-Thou”

relationships, but never to “I-it” relationships. So our own wholeness depends on our ability to acknowledge the wholeness of others.

And this also was part of the authority of Jesus – his own wholeness was an essential dimension of his holiness.

And God wants to do for each of us what Jesus did for the man in the synagogue—to free us from the forces that hold us down, hold us back, keep us from experiencing the abundance God desires for us, that keep us from experiencing our own wholeness, whether those forces are oppression, or illness, or fear, or a diminished sense of ourselves. This is part of the gift that contemplative prayer offers—as we sit in silence, asking for nothing, just being available, there are sometimes moments when we can experience the fullness of God’s love. And we may not have a feeling that we can recognize—but we may find ourselves more grounded, more free, more whole as the days go by and we make ourselves present to God.

And this is part of the work of justice, to take up God’s mission in the world to clear away the oppressions that rob others of experiencing the fullness and abundance God intends for all of us, for each of us.

And again, we receive our own wholeness as we grant it to others—this is part of the flow of mutuality that Jesus revealed in his own life. There is a lot that is different among the four gospels, but one thing that is the same is the full attention that Jesus gives to each person he meets. He is always fully present to each person—paying attention, listening. Sometimes his disciples have to kind of nudge him to remind him of the next thing, because Jesus is giving his full attention to the person in front of him, seeing each person as a whole person in who they are—a *Thou*, not an *it*.

This is the compassionate presence of Jesus that each of us can bear in the world, and that this world badly needs. This is one way that each of us can participate in the mission of God, in the *shalom* of God – that peace, balance, wellness, and wholeness of God. *Shabbat Shalom!* Amen.