When Newness Comes: A New Power

Mark 3: 19b-27

First Sunday in Lent

Feb 14, 2016

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 Today marks not only Valentine’s Day but also the first Sunday in Lent, the season in the Christian church that leads us toward the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As I was thinking about this convergence of days earlier this week, I remembered a disdainful comment Lisa Heffner made recently about her dislike for this (and these are my words, not hers) “hallmark” holiday that lures us into buying expensive cards and gifts in some effort to proclaim feelings, that if truly genuine, should and would be naturally expressed each and every day without making an “event” of it. I share something of her sentiment but as I thought about that I wondered also if that is the same attitude some of us have about Lent as well: a feeling of forced focus on ponderous things as a set up to facing the harsh reality of Jesus’ crucifixion and death, before we celebrate resurrection. There is some truth to that: the season of Lent invites us to seriously consider the meaning of discipleship, not only for Jesus, but for ourselves; something we *can* and *should* think about all year round becomes the center of our attention, not to sell greeting cards or flowers, but to prepare us to appreciate the glory of resurrection and the new life it offers. Lent asks for intentionality, for contemplative reflection, for serious preparation for lives of faithful living. And this season Deb and I want to specifically focus our common reflection on preparing for what happens on the “other end”; we want to seriously consider **what will be different** “when newness comes”, to us as people of faith and as a congregation anticipating new pastoral leadership and a new season of faithful living together in this new year.

 And so we begin with this rather strange passage from Mark’s gospel. It’s only the third chapter but no grass grows under Jesus’ feet in Mark’s account! Already we’re told of Jesus’ baptism, selection of disciples, of exorcisms and forgiving sins. In just these three short chapters, Mark tells stories of Jesus eating with sinners, fasting, taking about some mysterious “kingdom” that is coming now and even has him healing on the Sabbath. This upstart Teacher is breaking rules, hanging out with the wrong kind, assuming power and telling people what to do! He’s got everybody talking and has already raised the hackles of the religious establishment. He’s intriguing and offensive and curious and clearly uncontrollable. And so when he goes home for a presumed rest, folks of all sorts are at his door, trying to figure him out.

 Some people think he has some sort of mental illness. Now that’s not the terminology *they* would have used: they would have said he was “crazy”, “insane,” “possessed by evil spirits”. His family seems to support this idea; the text says they tried to “take charge of him, “restrain” him, even, “rescue him from himself.” They were afraid of him! Afraid for him!

 And then the religious leaders weighed in: they were convinced that Beelzebul, the “chief power of evil,” possessed him and that he used some kind of witchcraft. They figured the only way Jesus could cast out demons was if he was one himself!

 All these accusations and suspicions raise the question of what’s really going on here? This is just the *beginning* of Jesus’ ministry in Mark’s Gospel, and yes, while it seems to start off with a bang, is Jesus really *that* popular, *that* threatening, *that* influential already to cause such a stir? Apparently so! From the start, Jesus clearly has access to some amazing power that is changing people’s lives in ways never seen nor heard of before. He’s healing people. He’s removing the cloud of mental illness that engulfs some. He’s calling people away from their livelihoods to follow a way that is unheard of. He’s impressive and suspicious all at the same time. Their fear of his difference labels him “crazy.” Their uncertainty about his power labels him “satanic”. The newness he brings to hearts and lives in bold and dramatic ways makes him dangerous and unpredictable in their sight. Jesus tries to explain:

 “How can Satan cast out Satan?” he asks them. How can someone be against themselves? He can’t *be* the thing he is getting rid of! It doesn’t make sense! It’s like saying you are against discrimination but hating your neighbor of color. It’s like protesting violence by throwing rocks! How can you judge someone for talking out of turn when you’re a gossip yourself?

 Jesus goes on: “a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand”. We know that’s true when we look at countries rife with civil war, when we see infighting and divisiveness in households and churches. Jesus says, “…a household divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” And we know he’s right!

 And finally he points out to them that the attacker can’t get in a house defended by a strong person. In order to breach such a barrier, one would have to overtake the home’s defender first….

 So what is Jesus talking about here? Mark reminds us that this is a parable: a story with a lesson, a metaphor we can relate to that teaches us something something else. I think Jesus is trying to say that he doesn’t heal or release or welcome or invite by the imperial power of Rome, of the power of religious tradition or even by the values of family ties. But what I think he is saying is that the power to heal and to liberate and to include and to welcome is an entirely new thing! It is a power they are unfamiliar with; a power much different than what they are used to.

 For you see, they were used to the kind of power *we* most often see, power that divides and conquerors, the power that separates and judges. They were used to a power that holds on and holds out; they were used to a power that restricts and limits. But this new power Jesus brings initiates a new way of being in the world: a new way to experience our relationships with our families, with each other, and with God.

 This new power isn’t about limits and restrictions but about welcome and release! It’s about openness to a new source of energy and insight; a new way of wisdom and delight! There has long been a saying within minority groups seeking a new understanding in the world; I heard it first many years ago in the women’s movement. It’s remarkably similar to what I hear Jesus saying here. The saying is this: “you cannot use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.” That is, you can’t inaugurate change by doing the same old things. You can’t use violence to resist violence. You can’t make something right by returning the wrong done to you. It means that in order for there to be justice, in order for there to be healing, in order for there to be peace, we will all need to use a **new** kind of power, a new source of energy, a new way of being in relationship to make newness come. What had these folks flummoxed was that Jesus was using a new power: the power of love, the power of mercy, the power of justice, the power of peace to bring a new reality to the world. They did not recognize it, didn’t know how to embrace it, they did not know what to do with such a dynamic, transforming power in their midst!

 But I pray we do. I have been learning about a new kind of power in these days since my cancer diagnosis. I have been learning about the power of chemotherapy to kill cells, good as well as bad. I have been learning about the power of spirit and mind to create a positive and peaceful heart, and an attitude that generates healing. I have been learning anew about healing touch—the power of massage and reike to raise or lower blood pressure, reduce pain, to effect physical change. I have been learning about the power of loving support and what it means to feel accompanied and encouraged. And I have been learning anew about the power of God to remain life-filled and loving and faithfully giving. There is a new power at work in the world; it can be the power **we** use and extend to ourselves and those around us.

 And that’s what Jesus was talking about, even this early in his ministry. He demonstrates a new kind of power that gives us a glimpse of what the world can look like when newness comes.

 This is the power we are called to embrace as followers of Jesus. Here in our families and in our relationships, here in our church and surrounding community. A kind of power that lets go of fear and embraces love. A kind of power that lets go of the way it’s always been for the way God imagines it to be. It’s the kind of power that gives willingly and generously; the kind of power that seeks wholeness and inclusion of all. It redefines who we call “family” and names our common language “love” as it challenges us to speak it clearly and compassionately to one another.

 Valentine’s Day marks a day when we are called to proclaim what we already feel for one another. Today also marks the beginning of a journey many of us started a long time ago, and perhaps need to begin again as if for the very first time. Lent calls us to prepare ourselves for what is yet to be while at the same time living into the discipleship to which we have been called. We recognize the deeper meaning of both Valentine’s Day and Lent not by buying cards or singing hymns, but by embodying a new power, an outrageously loving power which transforms lives. We can’t do the same things and expect to be different. We can’t follow the same rules and expect the outcome to change. But we can embrace a new love and embody its new power in all of our being. And we if we do, we will be ready…when newness comes.