

Crazy People – Crazy Church!

The 4th Sunday after Epiphany sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers
presented Sunday, January 28th, 2018 at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Mark 1:23-24

Crazy people are not crazy: they're just odd. And they tend to upset the apple cart. I'll call them "*crazy*" just to maintain your attention. I served five churches in 35 years as a full-time minister and it never failed to amaze me. In every place I have ever ministered, just when things were beginning to go right, the crazies show up. Just when I was having a meaningful conversation, some crazy person interrupts. Just when the committee has reached a spectacular decision, the crazy one jumps up to speak. Just when it looks like the entire congregation was happy, the crazies show up angry and upset.

It's the same in other institutions besides churches. We ask ourselves, "How in the world did that crazy person get into this group?" We even find usually reasonable people suddenly acting crazy. It happens in our families. We ask our life-time partners, "*Where did that comment come from?*"

Now some folks have stopped attending church because too many crazies are there. We go to church to hear words of comfort, some warm lesson of love; instead, we hear crazy stuff. Well! The same thing happened to Jesus, just when he was starting his ministry. It happened like this: Just after Jesus had gathered his most trustworthy disciples, he began his public ministry by going to the synagogue to teach. The people were duly astounded and impressed, but as soon as he began that ministry, the crazies showed up. In today's gospel Mark says that a man with an unclean spirit appeared in the synagogue hollering, "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*"

The Bible sometimes calls these people possessed by a demon, for it says they have an *unclean spirit*. Ever since the first century, we Christians have struggled to define just what these unclean spirits are, just what these persons under possession are. Some have ventured to say that these diseases were first-century attempts to define mental illness. Others have said that some supernatural power was at work, or that we should not "*define away*" demonic possession. Whatever way we define these "*unclean*" spirits, or these types of possession, the gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to deal with them. Maybe Jesus would rather have talked about the hopes of his new ministry or about what love and justice and freedom are, but he was faced immediately by this man with an unclean spirit. We may rather talk about many things, instead there is a story today about a man possessed with an unclean spirit.

There are people in every healthy church who seem not to fit in, either at church or in society around us. It's Sunday morning and the woman shakes her husband awake and says:

"John, it's late and we have to get up and ready for church. Let's go!"

John says, *"You get up if you want. I'm not going to church."*

"You're not going to church? Stop kidding! We always go to church."

"Well, I'm not going. Nobody wants me over there. They are not in the least interested in what I say or think. They clearly don't like me and they think I'm crazy and I'm not going."

"But John, we have to go! You're the minister!"

People who just don't fit in are not raving lunatics, of course. They are not drooling from the mouth. A proper analyst might conclude that they are obsessed or controlled by other spirits such as loneliness itself, or possessed by anger, or possessed by deep dissatisfaction or hurt, or driven by insecurity. Sometimes we call them crazy. Often, they are, and if the moment is right, and we are with other people we trust, we will roll our eyes when mention is made of them. At other times, we become impatient with them.

You know what? And thank God - churches attract crazy people. It's mostly harmless, of course. Some people are imbalanced. Some folks are angry. Almost always, people are lonely who are drawn to this place. But, friends, let me say that this phenomenon is not a bad thing. Every healthy church attracts crazy people. Look at Jesus' ministry. The first people drawn to Jesus and fascinated by him – are the crazies, folks who seem possessed by demons. We could regret that fact, or like many diseased churches, we could bend to their every wish; we could let them guide us; we could become possessed as they are possessed.

But the church fails in our mission if we let ourselves be taken captive by the possessed. Again, there are churches who do. They fret and worry about the folks with the loudest voices, who always ask the crazy question, or who are always yelling out like the man did to Jesus: *"What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?"*

Jesus does an interesting thing with the folks who are crazy. He neither ignores them nor becomes impatient with them, and he certainly does not allow himself to be taken captive by them. No, he speaks the truth with them. He ministers freedom to them. Real ministry to the possessed does not mean being shaped by their agendas, their boundless needs, or trying to answer their boundless complaining. Ministry to the possessed means speaking a truth that comes from beyond this earthly realm. Ministry means being confident in the love and power which has brought us all here in the first place.

"Be silent and come out of him," Jesus said to the man possessed by an unclean spirit. *"And,"* the Gospel of Mark says, *"the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, did come out of him. They were all amazed."* Jesus meets the disease and possession of this world and delivers us from that possession.

The first truth is that we are all possessed at some point, at some level of our lives – especially those of us who call other people *"crazy."* We all have some bondage which keeps us away from freedom and release, keeps us from enjoying life, the world and each other in the way God has designed for us. Each of us can be driven crazy by a sense of being possessed by something not quite right. The healthy church is where we can bring our craziness face to face with Jesus. The healthy church is where each of us can bring our madness to the love and holiness of Jesus; and Jesus does heal us. He needs only to say the truth, speak the word. The people in the first century were amazed at Jesus' teaching because it had a deep authority; the authority to speak to their deepest needs and even to their most unclean possessions. Jesus had the authority of love...and Jesus still speaks. He speaks to the crazies who show up around us, and to the crazy that is inside each of us. Today, we are face to face with the holiness of God, the truth of Jesus Christ. That holiness, that love sets us free. Amen.

Let us pray: *O blessed Lord Jesus, you ministered to all who came to you. Look with compassion upon all who are possessed or who have lost their health and freedom. Restore to us the assurance of your unfailing mercy. Remove from us the fears that beset us. Strengthen us in the work of our recovery, and give us all patient understanding and persevering love. In your name we pray. Amen.*