

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

February 1, 2009  
*4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time*  
Mark 1:21-28

### **Power to Do**

As Christians we are called to look at the world around us from a perspective that is given to us by God in Jesus Christ. That means that we don't necessarily jump on the bandwagon of wherever the latest popular sentiment may lead. As people of God, the lens through which we view and understand the world is our Christian faith. It is for each of us to be vigilant in ensuring that our faith is front and center as we engage with the world.

In our travels last fall, we had many opportunities to see the world through that Christian lens in quite a number of contexts. As Jody and I have been sharing with you in the last three Sundays, the bulk of our 4-month sabbatical last fall was spent in Northern Ireland working as volunteers at the Corrymeela Community. And because we spent 3 months there, our experiences there were deep and profound, giving us much to think about and ponder as we examine our faith and our ministry here in Montana.

But we did have bookend experiences on both sides of our time at Corrymeela. For we began our sabbatical in Scotland and we concluded it in Germany. Scotland, because for many Presbyterian ministers, this is the place of our Presbyterian roots. It is right up there with the Holy Land as a place to go in order to make connections with the generations who have gone before us and from whom we have received our faith today. Germany was included in our travels not as much for its religious heritage as for its political and historical heritage and even more so because of the family connections we have there.

For today I want to share a bit about an experience we had in Scotland. It's an experience that points to the contrast between good and evil in our modern world today.

After our cross-country train trip to Philadelphia, the first week of September, we left Philadelphia on September 11 and flew to Glasgow, Scotland, arriving there the morning of September 12. It was a Friday, and we were there for a week-long event that began the next evening on Saturday. This gave us a day and a half to get adjusted to the local time zone and to get our bearings. We caught a train from Glasgow in the late morning and traveled to the small town of Dunblane, which is about 35 miles northeast of Glasgow. It was in Dunblane that we were to spend the next four nights at a conference center called the Scottish Churches House. Because this house is only about a 10 minute walk from the Dunblane train station and because we were each traveling with one rolling duffel and a backpack or shoulder bag, Jody, Martha and I made our way by foot up High Street through about as picturesque a Scottish town as you can imagine. We walked over a stone bridge, past a butcher shop, a flower shop, a fruit stand, several bakeries as well as other little shops, all bustling with Friday afternoon business. At the top of the street was a gigantic church that we later found out is the Church of Scotland's Dunblane Cathedral. When we reached the cathedral we could see down the street to the right the Scottish Churches House, our destination.

It was all quite enchanting and I had to keep poking myself that it wasn't all a dream. I told Jody and Martha I felt like I was in the middle of a James Herriot story. James Herriot, by the way, is a favorite English author of ours who wrote stories for children about a country veterinarian in England in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It wasn't until the next day when we were exploring the town some more, when we were inside the cathedral that I realized why the name of the town, Dunblane, had sounded vaguely familiar. We came across a stone pillar erected in the cathedral's south aisle with the words encircling its base, "The Tragedy of Dunblane 1996."

The pillar is a memorial to the 16 school children, ages 5 and 6, and 1 school teacher who had died in a shooting in the Dunblane Primary School on March 13, 1996. The killer, a local member of the community, also took his own life at the end of his rampage. It remains the deadliest single targeted mass homicide on children in the history of the United Kingdom. The senselessness of this horrible and evil act completely ruptured this idyllic community and sent waves of shock and outrage throughout the world.

In the quiet of a Saturday afternoon in Dunblane Cathedral, I was reminded of this horror as I gazed at this stone monolith. I found out later that it was in this same cathedral that a memorial service was held later in the year in which the moderator of the Church of Scotland, James Aitken Whyte presided and preached. It was the church's response to this outrageous evidence of evil in the midst of our world today.

When we read the stories of Jesus' life and the events that are recorded, we sometimes find ourselves unable to connect with them since the culture and setting are so foreign and anachronistic. This has often been the case when reading the stories of Jesus' encounters with people said to be possessed by demons. Fred Craddock, one of my very favorite preachers and Bible scholars said of this passage, "The preacher will, of course, need to locate and identify the forms and strategies of evil equivalent to the first-century demons. No service is rendered simply by announcing we no longer believe in demons. While that is true for most, not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in our world." (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year B Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*. 1984, Abingdon Press, p. 143) Those words jumped off the page when I read them and prompted my memory of this experience in Scotland. For indeed this tragic event in Dunblane, Scotland and the others like it that have sadly happened in the intervening 13 years are sobering reminders of the evil forces that are at play around us.

How do we make sense of these forces and what do we in the church of Jesus Christ have to say in response?

The memorial itself in Dunblane Cathedral seeks to provide solace in the words that are carved upon it. All four sides of the stone are covered with deeply carved letters - the literary extracts of which are from several sources: From Matthew's gospel, "He called a little child to Him, set it down in their midst and said, 'Hear the truth. Unless your hearts are changed and you become like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven at all.'" On another side is an excerpt from *The Children's Prayer* by R. H. Stoddard (1825-78), "If there is anything that will endure the eye of God, because it is pure, it is the spirit of a little child." On the third side, from *The Poet's Journal Third Evening* by Bayard Taylor (1825-78), "But still I dream that somewhere there must be the spirit of a child that waits for me." And on the fourth side words by W. H. Auden (1907-73), "We are linked as children in a circle dancing." These words evoke images of God who receives and love and cares for the children who perished in this massacre.

It's the same love that Jesus shows for the demon-possessed man who interrupts his teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. For in his confrontation with the man, Jesus is able to summon out of him that which has kept him apart from God and apart from the community around him. The reaction of the witnesses to Jesus' interaction is amazement

and astonishment. “What is this?” they ask, “ A new teaching—with authority!” (Mk. 1:27) We’re not told in the text of Mark’s gospel, what was the content of Jesus’ teaching that day in the synagogue. Instead we’re witnesses to the transformative power to do great things that is exhibited by Jesus. For the demon-possessed man is freed from his past and transformed into someone who can live in his community.

This event in Jesus’ ministry is one of the very first acts recorded in this gospel. It’s Mark’s way of setting the stage for what is to come in the following 15 chapters. For us the meaning of this text comes in our understanding that what Jesus did for that man 2000 years ago is something that can still be done today in the places and situations in which transformation is desperately needed.

One last recollection from our time in Dunblane last September. The Scottish Churches House, where we stayed is an ecumenical conference center that is run by a group of Christian churches from across Scotland. It is known as a place where conversation and dialog around the church’s role in society is regularly discussed. Hanging on the wall in one corner of the dining room of the Scottish Churches House is a colorful needlepoint tapestry that depicts 16 children and their teacher playing in a school yard. Each of the children is engaged in the activities you’d expect to see in a group of kindergartners. It was designed and made to honor the memory of the children who died in the Dunblane massacre. Hanging where it does in this dining room, it clearly serves as a point of conversation and discussion about this event and its aftermath.

Next to this tapestry stands a gorgeous handcrafted grandfather clock that rings every quarter hour. It looks to be made of cherry wood and it gleams with a the luster that shines from beautiful fine furniture. Upon closer examination there is a small plaque next to the clock that explains its origins and why it is that it stands next to the memorial tapestry. The horror that spread across Scotland after the massacre made it all the way to the national prison in Aberdeen. A number of the inmates there were moved to show their solidarity with all of the other people in Scotland in expressing their condolences to the people of Dunblane. Because of their circumstances of being locked up in prison which prevented them from reaching out physically, they decided to express their sympathy through the building of this grand and beautiful clock that could be given to the people of Dunblane. And so it came to the Scottish Churches House where it will toll the passing of time for many years to come and reminding all who hear of the prisoners’ condolences.

My friends, the evil that exists in the world around us is real and relentless. But for us, the believers in and followers of Jesus, that evil is more than confounded and neutralized by the power-to-do that Jesus provides in his love for us.

The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is one of the ways in which our commitment to Jesus is regularly renewed. For when we partake of the body and blood of Jesus we are committing again to follow him and to look at the world around us and make sense of it through our relationship with Jesus. Come to the table today with your Christian lenses so that we can see the hopes and possibilities that God sees in us and in the world.