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“From Stumbling Blocks to Stepping Stones”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

February 1, 2015

Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8: 1–13

Call and Response:

What is this... a new teaching?

With authority... he turns stumbling blocks into stepping stones.

Jesus is a man on a mission

He travels to Capernaum, and according to plan, arrives promptly on the Sabbath
and immediately unrolls a scroll to the appointed text and begins to teach.

And the crowds in astonishment comment that Jesus teaches in a way

unlike the scribes, who are excellent teachers themselves,

scholars of the Scriptures and keepers of the traditions of Judaism.

How so? How is Jesus' teaching different, I want to ask the Gospel writer,

who hardly has time to elaborate before Jesus is interrupted

by a man with an unclean spirit, who heckles his lecture?

How is this rabbi's teaching markedly different from the teaching

of those of those other bastions of Jewish tradition?

But I suppose we'll never know because Jesus in this story only *begins* to teach.

He is interrupted by an unclean spirit before we get the full picture

or the full answer to our question.

I wonder if he was frustrated in having his agenda interrupted,

in seeing his train of thought uncouple,

in having the body of his work broken here,
perhaps for the first time in his ministry?

#1: A Tale of Two Unclean Spirits

Over the Christmas holidays, I was worn out, as is my usual custom.
Now don't get me wrong, I thoroughly enjoyed all of the events that
swirl around church during the Advent and Christmas season:

the Advent Festival, the Wednesday evening communion services,
the fellowship dinner and carol sing-along, the many parties,
the Christmas Eve Candlelight Pageant.

It's all very meaningful and beautiful to me.

But by Christmas day, I am *always* ready for a long winter's nap.

And if truth be told, I look forward to the days following Christmas

almost as much as the days leading up to Christmas to catch up on my rest.

And all was going according to plan on Christmas Day: the family was here,

the gift wrappings and ribbons already were cleared away, the food was hot,
the table was set for us to sit down and enjoy one of our family traditions,

Christmas dinner, when I was interrupted by *a house with an unclean spirit*.

Almost as soon as I took the weight off my feet,

the phone rang and I received word that a friend who had been hospitalized
over the holidays would be returning home soon,

and that her house would need cleaning out immediately before she returned

or she faced the possibility of her children being taken into foster care.

So I sent out a notice to some of her closest friends,

and on the day after Christmas and throughout that next week,

a group of us gathered at her home armed with
rubber gloves, cleaning solutions, mops, brooms, garbage bags,

and room deodorizers *to exorcise the unclean spirit from her home*.

It was awkward and very personal, going into someone else's nest,

sorting and cleaning their clothes, changing their bed linens, replacing towels,

straightening up their devotional books, filing important documents.
But it was important for this woman's transformation
and for her family's health and welfare, and it was a pleasure
for us to do, even though it was not part of our agenda for the holidays.

How is Rabbi Jesus' teaching markedly different from that of the other rabbis?

The people seem to think that he possesses a certain authority.

I want to think that his apparent authority belies an integrity

which comes from the way Jesus integrates
the words and teachings of his mouth

with the thoughts and attitudes of his heart,

and with his transformative actions towards others

which is aimed at restoring them to their communities.

It's all of one piece: thought, word and deed. There is not even a pause to align them.

They coalesce immediately in Jesus, as if by a higher power.

The man with the unclean spirit interrupts Jesus in the midst of his discourse,

delaying his agenda, interrupting his plans, just as the house with

the unclean spirit interrupted my activities for Christmas week.

Both unclean could be viewed as stumbling blocks:

forces intent upon disrupting the mission of God.

But Jesus hardly flinches, incorporating the interruption and disruption of this man

as a stepping stone into his ministry of inclusion, transformation, and restoration.

I wish my process had been as seamless.

Twentieth century German poet, Jochen Klepper, once said that true authority

is deeply rooted in our trust in God, who knows us well

and calls each of us by name.

Where our words and deed dance together, God is honored,

even in the midst of human doubt and weakness.

(cited by Rev. Dr. Frederick R. Trost, *To Teach with Authority and Not as the Scribes*)

What is this... a new teaching?

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#2: A Tale of Two Browns

What were *you* doing on the evening of August 9, 2014?

I can't say that I remember.

It was a Saturday night. It was in the high heat of the summer.

And oh yes, if I look back at my calendar, I see that I went to a church potluck

dinner hosted by Chris and Meredith Brown at their home that evening.

But as we were sitting out on their screened back porch, rolling out the scroll

of community, cheerful conversation, and preparing to share a meal,

an 18-year-old black man/child in Ferguson, Missouri had been

confronted by police for an alleged robbery at a convenience store

and died as a result of six gunshot wounds.

Ironically, his name was Brown, too: Michael Brown.

Almost immediately, it seemed, we were inundated with stories of protesters

taking to the streets, rioting, swarming, looting,

chanting "hands up, don't shoot," and "black lives matter."

Tear gas dispersed the unruly crowds, and tears seemed to flow for the Browns

and for other families who felt their children's lives had been taken unfairly.

On August 15, Darren Wilson was named as the officer who shot Michael Brown.

On August 20, a grand jury was appointed to begin investigating whether

Officer Wilson should be charged criminally.

And on August 20, relative peace returned to Ferguson as people placed

their trust in the justice system, although protests began to break out

elsewhere as similar tragic incidents followed.

You know the end of this Brown story. On November 24, the grand jury

declined to indict Darren Wilson for firing the six fatal shots at an unarmed

victim, and pandemonium ensued, not only in Ferguson,

but in Cleveland, New York, Oakland, and even here in Durham.

Now I have to admit that I would much rather be enjoying deviled eggs
with Chris and Meredith Brown on their beautiful back porch
than attending to the chaotic aftermath of Michael Brown's death.
According to my agenda of building community and goodwill
among this church family, Michael Brown is a stumbling block.
But let's ask the question of the demoniac here:
what has this to do with Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God,
the prophet who marshaled in a stand-off between the kingdom of God
and the kingdom of Satan,
the prophet who drew a line in the sand between the forces that restore life
and the realm of death?

And what now demands our attention in order to bring transformation
and true justice to our society?

What is required of us to make our words and our deeds dance together
and to honor God?

A Celtic poet offers this insight:

*Ah God, You with the Maker's eye,
can tell if all that's feared is real,
and see if life is more than what
we suffer, dread, despise and feel.
If some by faith no longer stand,
nor hear the truth Your voice intones,
stretch out Your hand to help Your folk,
from stumbling blocks to stepping stones.*

(Celtic Daily Prayer, Harper, San Francisco. "Aiden Readings", January 14, p. 311)

Sorry Chris and Meredith. Save me a few deviled eggs, please,
while I attend to this interruption.

What is this... a new teaching?

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#3: Saved by the bell

If you spend any time in the church during the week,
you notice immediately that our doorbell rings constantly.

No, let me qualify that because I think I could stand it more if the doorbell
rang regularly and constantly,
but it rings sporadically throughout the day.

Enough so that I can hardly hold a single thought in my head
or write a sentence that makes good sense or uses proper grammar,
or talk coherently on the telephone.

Tuesdays, especially, are days when the doorbell demon dances all day long.

Ding-dong: a man walks over from Urban Ministries and wants one of those
“love bags,” as the people on the street call them—a blessing bag
filled with snack food and sometimes water.

Ding-dong, ding-dong: a group of women file in one by one to meet
in a support group called Overeaters Anonymous, for those whose
eating habits are subject to extreme emotional fluctuations.

Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong: a huge number of individuals file through
the glass doors for a support group called Al-Anon, for families dealing
with addiction issues.

Ding-dong: a woman with a suitcase rings in at 5:00 p.m., saying that she is stranded
in Durham because a driver from Johnston County dropped her here,
thinking she would have more opportunities to “start over”
since she is a convicted felon.

Ding-dong: likewise, a man with a fifteen-year-old son arrives at the door,
saying they are stranded here from New York because the person
who intended to house them is now in jail.

They want a bus ticket back to New York
or a place for man and child to stay overnight.

That’s what our days are like in the church office.

The devil is in the doorbell, and he is legion.

And Valerie is usually the saint in these situations, or Marie or Mary Jo,
Jo or Bob, or Carol Wills; I'm usually the one with the unclean spirit,
spouting expletives at the doorbell like a scribe!

Now, we could lament the constant interruption and pray that Jesus
would exorcise the source of our frustration, just as he exorcised
the unclean spirit from the man who interrupts his teaching.

Or we could learn from Jesus in his Sabbath setting who teaches very little, actually,
hardly gets a word out of his mouth, certainly commits nothing to paper,
doesn't pontificate like those scholarly scribes,
who can quote the most astute Hebrew pundits as their sources of wisdom,
but instead, who hears, listens, pays attention, and responds
to those who cross his path in need: any of them, all of them.

They don't trip him up, as we might expect; they pave his way; they are his Way.
My Celtic devotion again says it like this:

"God loves paradoxes and contradictions. When we are weak, we are strong.
Every curse becomes a blessing, and stumbling blocks
can be turned to stepping stones."

(Celtic Daily Prayer, Harper, San Francisco. "Aiden Readings", January 14, p. 311)

And so I ask you one last time about this man, Jesus; this Holy One of God:

What is this... a new teaching?

With authority... he turns stumbling blocks into stepping stones.

Amen.