

# First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 1.21-28  
“The Fullness of Joy”  
The Rev. Dr. Fred G. Garry  
October 1, 2017

I like to go it alone when I visit a museum. Sometimes I will get the headphone guides, but usually not the first time. I want to walk the halls and see how the art is organized and what is placed next to what. Yet, when it came to the Vatican, I didn't blink. We signed up for the tour.

The Vatican is part museum, part palace, and part working government. And I knew from just a slight bit of research that navigating the Vatican collection is way beyond my skill set.

For instance, one of the most famous paintings in the world, Raphael's Aristotle and Plato walking through the Agora, is actually a mural on a bedroom wall. I would have missed this entirely without a guide.

Yet, where the guide really earned her keep was the Sistine Chapel, the great work of Michelangelo. Although the chapel is not much larger than our sanctuary it is a riot of color and movement. Covering the ceiling are scenes from creation as well as the prophets and sibyls that form a great cloud of witnesses in the room. Although that would have been enough, where we have a mosaic cross in our sanctuary, the Sistine chapel has a massive chancel wall that depicts the Last Judgement. It is as if Michelangelo painted the beginning and the end.

Our guide walked us through two parts we may have missed. She showed us the little black squares strategically left on the frescoes. The little black squares are what the entire room looked like until a Japanese company paid to have the chapel restored. For centuries the frescoes were muted and dark, now the room explodes with color and movement no longer shrouded.

Yet, the most fascinating moment was when she pointed out the hidden self-portrait of Michelangelo in the Last Judgment.

The Last Judgment fresco depicts Jesus at the top, returning to judge the quick and the dead; and Satan at the bottom gathering the wicked to hell. One of the people going to heaven in the fresco is St. Bartholomew, the apostle. Bartholomew, who was martyred, is depicted holding his own skin because he was flayed to death. On the skin is a misshapen face. You could hear the gasps when the guide revealed Michelangelo painted his face on the flayed skin; it is his self-portrait.

My favorite portrait was of Michelangelo's critic, Biago de Casena, the master of ceremonies for the Pope. Biago was well known for criticizing all the nudity in Michelangelo's work, so the artist painted Biago on the bottom of the fresco, not far from Satan. Biago was painted as Minos the king of hell, complete with donkey ears and a snake biting him in the groin so provide his desired modesty.

Biago, the story goes, was quite upset as being depicted as going to hell so he complained to the pope. The Pope told him there was nothing he could do. He only had the keys to heaven. Hell was beyond his command. He could not change the painting.

Artists make choices. Indeed, interpreting art is a lot about trying to think behind the work itself. Why does the artist conceal something or expose it? Why choose blue or gray or yellow for the sky? Why did the artist look from above or below? One of the most famous paintings in the world, Las Meninas, is a painting about people trying to look at a painting while being painted. And it depicts the artist, Valazquez, standing in the middle of his own painting while painting looking at you. He created a conversation about intent and choice and why something is in and something is out.

We may never paint a fresco depicting ourselves in flayed flesh; we may never try to be as clever as Valazquez; but we do make choices that are designed to focus our gaze, define our world, determine what is in and what is out. Indeed, some say our culture today is awash in identity politics which is nothing more than demanding all claims and statements consider the choices we make, the ideals we use to define our world. We all make choices even if we don't know we are making them.

Our reading today is one of the most important choices of the gospel writer, Mark. Each gospel writer made a decision about what would be the first act of Jesus, the first display of power. For John it was turning the water into wine; for Luke it was Jesus preaching at Nazareth and nearly being killed but moving through a crowd as if mesmerizing them; Matthew has Jesus give the sermon on the mount before he describes the healing of a leper. Each gospel beginning is revealing. Today we read Mark's choice: freeing the man from the unclean spirit.

Each one of these choices reveals a great deal about the gospel writers and the people to whom they wrote. Each is a choice suggesting the intent of their work.

I recounted the people Michelangelo painted into his fresco because I believe it will help us understand what Mark is doing here. Mark is, in essence, painting a picture of the church encountering Jesus, being challenged by Jesus, and ultimately being freed. Mark begins his gospel with a healing story, a moment of power and authority, because he believes the church has become gripped with an unclean spirit that is tearing it apart. Hence, this is one of most important stories in his gospel because it tells us why Mark wrote it.

Remember, the church had been alive for about 40 years when Mark wrote. There were no gospels before him. He is the first. We need to keep that ever in mind; the gospel was written as a change, to effect a change.

When we read the letters of Paul, Peter, and James we easily find the problem that needs to change. The first generation of the church was deeply divided, bitterly divisive and extremely judgmental with each other. They all loved Jesus, but not each other. They knew Jesus was the holy one, but they didn't know how to live like him.

Jews hated Gentiles, men and women were at odds with each other, the citizens despised the commoners and the commoners despised the slaves. That was just the debates over identity. Then came cultic practices like circumcision and food preparation; there were divisions over temples and wealth, and who could speak and who could not speak. When they got really tired they even argued about the poor and politics.

The list goes on and on. Every apostolic letter is riddled with controversies. Paul is always calling them to be kind to each other, to outdo one another in acts of kindness, to have one mind, to be gracious. He called for such because they were not.

Perhaps nothing was more argued over and debated than who was in charge now that Jesus was in heaven and how long it would until he came back. Remember the first-generation church was in constant expectation that Jesus would come back to earth very, very soon and there would be a great cosmic battle with the Lawless One. The Holy One would do battle with the devil and his demons.

In our reading today we can see all these elements. The man who is unclean is being torn apart. Our translation says the unclean spirit convulsed the man, but in Greek the word means to be torn apart by dogs. Like Michelangelo and his self-portrait, he was showing how the church was being destroyed, they were not creating heaven so much as they were fighting over hell.

Please don't misunderstand me that our reading today is some sort of literary device or made up story. Mark is telling a story from the life of Jesus. But he is placing that story, choosing a specific story, to introduce the power of Jesus, his healing power. I believe he chose this story to send a message: you are tearing each other apart; you know who Jesus is, but you don't know what it means to live the will of Jesus. Mark is trying to put a mirror up before the reader like Valazquez; he is painting the church into the gospel to send a message: you are doing violence, you are tearing yourself apart.

This is not the cheeriest of messages. And it is fair to ask, why is the title of this sermon, "The Fullness of Joy?" I am glad you asked. I took the title from John's gospel because Mark never once uses the word "joy" in his gospel. It is missing. Remember how artist's make choices. What they leave in, what they out. It is as if there is no joy; it is what cannot be spoken.

If we read the letters of Paul and Peter and James and listen for what divided the church, how it was tearing itself apart, it would not be hard for us to look at our lives, our own time and place, and see such divisions, words tearing our communities apart. We have heaven on earth and we are working overtime to make it a living hell.

When I was in Casey's place, when I was in my first call, my first church, my first time as a presbyter, it was as if I were in midst of an unclean spirit. Lawsuits, fisticuffs, commissions, shouting matches: this was the stuff of the monthly meeting of the presbytery. Candidates for ministry like Casey were cannon fodder for theological battles over the authority of scripture.

At one such meeting, things got wildly out of hand. People were shouting and yelling and some were being physically restrained. The man sitting next to me was weeping. I asked him if he was okay. "They never told me," he said. "They never told me this was a problem." As the shouting and arguing persisted he explained to me that he was the object of their debate. He was recently ordained as an elder and no one told him that his being gay would be a problem for the presbytery. He looked destroyed, torn apart.

Looking back, what we needed was Jesus to tell us at that moment, be quiet. Stop tearing each other apart. We all loved Jesus, just not each other very much.

We have everything. We have riches and freedoms and opportunities beyond the imagination of most of the world. But imagine making it through a day right now and not hearing deep divisions, rancor, and words hurled to hurt and inflict and rip and tear people apart. We have everything and we are ruining it with an unclean spirit. We have been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven, the fullness of joy, but we are rushing toward the darkness. We have an unclean spirit.

This is what Mark tried to convey to the church. We are this person. We know who Jesus is, but we don't know what to do, how to live like him.

In the coming weeks, we are putting forward our annual stewardship campaign. Each year we ask you to grow in the spirit of generosity. And I hope we do. We have so many great things happening here, so many great opportunities. We need to grow in our giving to keep them going. But I must confess that I hope our growth in generosity would be more than just giving money. I hope our generosity grows toward people, towards neighbors and family members with whom we don't agree; I pray that we would respond to opposition with graciousness and not the common path of ridicule and shame.

There is an unclean spirit tearing us apart. There is a spirit of blame and accusation and disdain. We have been given all things, we are standing before the fullness of joy, but it is as if we don't know how to taste it. We know the bread is the body of Christ and cup is the blood of Christ, but we don't know how to give that life away to others, to offer it, to do what he said, "do this in memory of me." He was the Holy One not the correct one.

Mark wrote his gospel to heal a church being torn apart. He began his description of Jesus, what he did, with someone who knew the truth, but didn't know how to live the truth. We believe Jesus is merciful and just, kind and compassionate, the living lord who offers us new life. We believe in Jesus, but such belief falls apart when we do not believe in each other.

The fullness of joy is before us, but we must open our hearts to generosity and compassion. We must give from what has been given to us, but we must also the love and honor, have a spirit of generosity toward each other. It is not enough to give our treasure if we do not treasure the one to whom we give. Amen.