

The Feast of the Annual Meeting (Epiphany 4B).

Mark 1:21-28. Jan 28, 2018.

To be honest, I love these Sundays when we pile meanings on top of each other in layers, like a prudent Chicagoan getting dressed on a normal January day. Today is the fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, which is just a totally normal Sunday on which we continue to read about the beginnings of Jesus' public ministry. It is also the made up Feast of the Annual Meeting when we like many Episcopal churches in this area gather to conduct the business of the church. It is because of *this* fake Feast or maybe Fast that we decided to spice up our liturgy by welcoming new members today. But we also have a custom here of the rector's report for the Annual Meeting being delivered as the sermon during worship, and so I'm obligated to do some reflection on the past year and guessing about the year ahead. And finally and most importantly—because baptism is always the most important thing on any day when one happens—at Wiggle Worship today we are baptizing Zofia Ruth Krajewski Love. It sounds like a lot, but don't worry. We're going to get through it.

We are going to get through it by taking a slightly broader look at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, to include the stories we have read here the last two weeks. I'm sure that you all remember those stories, so I won't go back over them. Haha, just kidding. When Jesus begins his public ministry, he first gathers a community of friends around himself, and then immediately goes and gets his hands dirty in the synagogue, setting people free. We've read about the creation of the community the last two weeks, as Jesus goes around calling people out of their day to day lives and into something entirely new. And today, Jesus goes into the synagogue with his friends and immediately starts the dirty dangerous work of liberating God's people.

I say "dirty," but perhaps "unclean" or "impure" would be more accurate. You see, what may not be obvious to us now is that there is a very important purity code at work in this passage. We hear "unclean spirit" and we think "demon" and then many of us probably interpret this as mental illness, an interpretation that has all kinds of problems. But when we skip along to our own categories so blithely, we miss that "unclean" adds a whole new level of meaning to Jesus' action here. An unclean spirit was a communal problem, because everyone who came into contact with the afflicted person could be themselves defiled. I don't think it would be helpful—or at least not interesting—to spell out ancient purity codes, but basically, it was commonly believed that contact with something or someone unclean could make you religiously unclean. And then you would be excluded from certain very important elements of community and religious life.

The prudent action for Jesus to take here is to steer clear, the way we all too often do. It might even be said that the properly religious action would be to steer clear and

maintain his own reputation of purity. But the work of setting this guy free requires risk, danger, and ambiguity. Jesus starts out his ministry this way and never really stops doing things this way, always risking scandal and seeing through religious convention to live true to the deeper logic of faith. He invites collaborators and freedom fighters into his inner circle. He eats with sex workers and sinners. He is always willing to compromise his reputation to avoid compromising the truth. His hands are always dirty with the work of pulling us up out of the muck we have gotten ourselves stuck in.

When I think of St. Christopher's in the last year, I can't help but feel a resonance with this rolled-up-sleeves Jesus. You are a people who take a look at a need and barely notice the risk. You are a people of deep reverence but with little time for daintiness. As you will see when each of you comes back at noon for the business part of the annual meeting, this has been a year of remarkable activity and work. I have never been with a people so willing to hear God's call cutting through the normal clutter of a life and start following. You are a people whose hands are dirty with the messy, risky, sometimes unpopular work of setting God's people free from anything that obstructs the awareness of the love of God.

And none of us does it alone. It takes a community to do this kind of work, which is the deep wisdom behind Jesus first creating a community of friends. In Christian terms, it takes a community to proclaim the love of God so well that people are set free. And this is the kind of community, we hope, that we are baptizing Zofia into and into which we are welcoming however many new-ish folks are willing to stand up in a few minutes.

Our community has grown significantly in the past few months and couple of years. Depending on the vagaries of weekly attendance and how well we have made folks feel at home, this may be visible in a few moments. Growth brings welcome challenges of its own, as we try to find ways to be the same people but with more of us. But there's also a kind of wonderful simplicity to it. New folks: at our best we will share with you the love of God, and we will ask you to love God and God's world. This is the kind of community that we are trying to be. It is a type of community that can only be sustained if we all continue to recommit ourselves to it, through repentance and accepting forgiveness and showing up again and again to laugh and love and trust and believe and put ourselves together on the line for the faith that the point of the whole blessed world is how much God loves it.

We've tried to do this in the past year and folks, I am always amazed at how willingly you do it. And we are called to do it again. The mission of the church remains to follow along after Jesus *proclaiming* good news and *living* it as well as we can with God's grace. I can't wait for what you will let God do among us next. It is an honor to serve with you. Amen.