

The Rev. Paula Jefferson  
January 31, 2021  
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

*In the name of the Holy, Undivided Trinity, One God*

**Tell me your story.**

In 2014, a friend and I did a 2-week hike in Ireland. So great was our spirit of adventure, that we decided to take a cable car from Ireland to a small island off its coast. A narrow bit of the Atlantic Ocean separates this little island from Ireland. The water is too violent for boats to navigate, so the locals built a cable car, suspended high above the water, to cross back and forth.

Many of you have probably ridden in cable cars at ski slopes...those awesome glass bubbles with seating for 8 and airtight doors. Our Irish cable car was not quite up to these standards.... The floor was made of barn wood, and we could look through the spaces between the boards at the ocean swirling far below us. The door on our cable car was an old house door, with a door knob and window panes on the upper half.

Once we finally landed (and kissed the ground), we walked to the end of the island, the closest bit of Irish land to America. It was very windy on the island. To keep ourselves from blowing over, we walked along a stone fence, moving with the sheep.

This place is beautiful, isolated, and memorable. The people who live full time on the island do so without electricity. They love their island and its perpetual wind. They are a fiercely independent folk who work together for survival.

Their land is named Dursey Island.

Mark's gospel lesson takes place in Capernaum, where Jesus lived in his adulthood. When Jesus enters the synagogue and begins teaching, the people are astounded at his teaching because he teaches like one with authority or power---and "*not* as the scribes". I wondered what this comparison meant, so I did a little research.

According to Bibleodyssey.org, "The scribes of ancient Israel were a tiny, literate minority in an overwhelmingly illiterate and oral-based culture. It was scribes who put their people's oral traditions into writing<sup>1</sup>".

Israel's scribes reminded me of my father-in-law, who was a court reporter. He had a gift for hearing words and typing them *exactly* as he heard them. This is a very different skill than taking notes in a class or at a meeting, ...where we listen for meaning or relevance and write down our interpretations.

So, when scribes read Scripture in synagogue, perhaps it was like hearing a court reporter repeating what had been typed. But, when Jesus begins to read and teach, the people hear something different. They know it's different, but they can't quite put their finger on why....is this authority? Power?

There is one present, however, who recognizes this Teacher... immediately. The unclean spirit... Even though the humans in our story can't put their finger on what sets Jesus apart, the unclean spirit, *also from the spiritual world*, recognizes God.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.Bibleodyssey.org](http://www.Bibleodyssey.org)

It is what happens next in the story that Mark underscores for us: When the unclean spirit *names* Jesus, saying...”I know who you are, the Holy One of God”, Jesus takes immediate action. He rebukes the spirit, and then orders it out of the human.

The unclean spirit recognizes Jesus, but it is not the recognition alone that causes the exorcism. Jesus will not allow this unclean spirit to name him. Naming is a privilege of God; it is a sign of God’s covenant. In Genesis, God *invites* Adam to name all creatures, but it is God who names Adam. When God enters into covenant, God names.

Abram and Sarai [Sari] are given new names: Abraham, meaning “father of a multitude” and Sarah, meaning “mother of nations”. These names are signs of God’s *particular* covenant with Abraham and Sarah. Mary will have a baby and God tells her to name the child Jesus, through whom Creation will be reconciled to God. Jesus changes Simon’s name to Peter, meaning “Rock”, the foundation of the Church.

Jesus exorcises the unclean spirit and restores the human vessel to wholeness and wellness. *It is an act of love*, benefiting one *particular* person in a community of people who recognize Jesus the builder, but do not recognize God.

I was intrigued by this act of healing. And, as I began to think about it, I realized that all of Jesus’ healings occur within individuals. He doesn’t heal all humankind, per se...healing occurs individual by individual.

Jonathan Sacks, author of *Not in God's Name*, devotes a chapter to the Universality of Justice and the Particularity of Love. These are his words:

Justice is universal. Love is particular. Justice must be detached, impartial, applied equally to all. Love plays no part in [justice]....Love, on the other hand, is utterly particular.

It is easy to say, "I love all people". But, it is more challenging to say, "I love *you*" to an individual with a face that does not look mine or to a person with tattoos that recall antisemitism. It is easier to work at a food bank than to sit with one homeless, hungry person who hasn't bathed in a very long time.

Jesus enters our world to reconcile Creation to God—this is the universal, overarching movement of His work within Creation. But His day-to-day ministry, as it is reflected in Scripture, is to teach, heal, and love the individuals he meets. He is loving his neighbor, particularly. He is engaging with the person who harbors unclean spirits, tax collectors, lepers...

I'm reminded of the woman in Mark 5, who, unable to get to Jesus, reaches out to touch the hem of his garment...and she is healed in that moment. Jesus is aware that power has gone out from him...but he does not know to whom. He searches the crowd until the woman comes forward. And then he tells her, face-to-face, that her faith has healed her, to go in peace, and be freed from her suffering. He isn't satisfied to just know that someone was healed. He desires this act of love to be particular.

“Love your neighbor” isn’t meant to be *only* a universal ideal. It is a command of particularity....to seek relationship with another person....to ask, “Who are you? What is your name? Tell me your story”.

On a Sunday in 2018, I drove 8 hours to meet my dog for the first time. He was young...7 weeks old. The breeder had named him “Rascal because he got into absolutely everything.” I named him Dursey, because I drove over three rocky mountain passes to get to him, and he is strong, loving, beautiful, and fiercely loyal.

I find that people who do not know why Dursey is so named often ask me to repeat his name. But people who ask about his name, who want to know his story, *our* story, remember it.

We begin 2021 with an ongoing pandemic, a divided America, a jittery economy. Those are universal conditions—they apply to all of us. But they do not apply to each of us equally.

The witness of Jesus is to struggle for universal justice—that all people would be able to flourish—to live fully into the beings God created them to be.

But his ministry did not stop there. He also taught us to love the Other particularly...to go past recognition of the Other, to allow his compassion and love to meet the need of another.

If we are to knit together the red and blue yarns of our American society, it will be because enough of us choose particular acts of love for the yarn of another color. It will not be easy. It will require genuine curiosity and compassion for those who are fearful that our traditions are at risk. Genuine curiosity and compassion for those who are fearful of the violent extremes in secular and religious cults. And genuine acts of love for those who simply do not share my values.

God calls each of us to the particular act of loving our neighbor. What is God calling you to do?