

Pringles, Potato Chips and Us

Mark 1:21-28

January 29, 2012

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²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. **The gospel of the Lord.** Thanks be to God!

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. Welcome to worship, in this season of Epiphany. To remind you, Epiphany began with the celebration of the Magi's visit to Jesus and his family. Epiphany means "a sudden realization or comprehension of meaning"; a revealing, a manifestation of truth. Or we could say, an "ah ha!" moment. During these weeks of Epiphany in our scripture we see Jesus, revealed; we see truths about God made known. *Even* in the interesting story of our gospel this is true.

And "All in the synagogue were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." There was something different and noteworthy about Jesus' words and actions that day. An epiphany, an "ah ha" moment for those gathered there.

I wonder what about their encounter with Jesus was so illuminating... *I want you to think about that, for a moment, while I reminisce.*

I have been a pastor for 13 years. But I remember quite clearly, when I was moving through the call "process" in seminary. I am now mentoring a current seminarian, and our conversations bring me back. I remember the collective nervous energy at seminary concerning *approval* for ordination. The call process is a four year long process (your entire seminary career), the final year being the most rigorous. *Final* approval comes after you sit before a panel of professors who ask you difficult theological questions. At the time, it was very scary. (Oh what am I kidding, it would be scary NOW.)

Without approval, you cannot become an ordained pastor in the ELCA. Rumors spread about those who didn't make it—rumors spread around campus about what you should and shouldn't say. But an "ah ha!" moment came for me during a sermon preached in chapel by one of my favorite professors:

Professor Terence Freitheim preached a sermon entitled: "*Pringles, potato chips and seminarians.*"

I would have to say, Dr. Freitheim spoke with authority, but not as the voice of the institution. In his sermon, he described the difference between potato chips. *Pringles* fit neatly in a perfect row inside their canister—all the exact same shape and size (it's very scientific, actually. For perfect eating, and perfect order, ta da: A hyperbolic paraboloid!) Each chip formed to fit right on top of the other. They are fun to eat—I think the shape has something to do with it.

Dr. Freitheim compared *Pringles*, to potato chips that come in a bag—which are all sorts of different shapes and sizes. Pathetic, really. Except...He said, that as seminarians, and future pastors, it is far better for us to be like those oddly shaped chips in a bag, than the perfectly formed ones in a canister. Our STRENGTHS, he said, would not be in spite of our differences, but because of them—and, to lose our uniqueness, would be to ignore our call to its full potential.

Dr. Freitheim spoke with authority, but NOT the authority of the institution, or the authority that comes with his degrees and credentials, significant as they were. He spoke with the authority of a greater truth, an inherent truth: the kind of *truth* that connects with something deep inside us; the kind of truth that resonates with the heart and soul of our scriptures; the kind of truth that cuts through our human-made systems of power and rank and merit.

He spoke the Truth, about what it means to be a person of faith: *different*, yet all in the image of God; different, yet connected; different yet GOOD...and able to create and love and give and serve uniquely through the different gifts we have. Bottom line: we shouldn't try to be anyone other than ourselves; our *best* selves, perhaps, but ourselves, none-the-less. An “ah ha” moment for me.

And maybe it should have been obvious...but the continued pressures of seminary and the process of becoming a pastor sort of narrowed my vision. Even within our tradition that *isn't* legalistic about God, I was becoming legalistic about what it means to be a pastor. I was trying to fit into some sort of mold of what a “good pastor” is—rather than just seeking to be one, in my own way.

That one sermon changed my whole perspective.

It was an “ah ha” moment for the crowd in the synagogue that day when Jesus shocked and astounded them when he spoke with authority, and not as the scribes—the scribes being the religious establishment—the ones who knew the rules and all the “right” answers. While it may seem that the healing of the possessed man is the focus of what is going on in the synagogue, the greater surprise for the crowd came in the AUTHORITY with which Jesus spoke. There were other so-called healers out there—but what made Jesus *different* was the AUTHORITY with which he taught.

Jesus didn't teach them like the scribes—Jesus taught them with an inherent authority that resonated deep within them; deep within their tradition, too; and cut through *narrow interpretations*, and *small, exclusive teachings* about God. Maybe Jesus connected with them, the same way Dr. Freitheim did with me.

Mark, in his gospel says the crowd was *astounded* (ἐξεπλήσσαντο): literally, they were “*blown out of their minds.*” That's what the Greek says. Whatever Jesus taught that day, really shook up the rules—the status quo—the establishment. He challenged the systems of power and rank and merit. I wonder

what he said?... The text doesn't tell us—so we imagine, what kind of **mind-blowing** things did Jesus *often* teach?

Maybe he told them the parable about God being like a father who had two very different sons: one who squandered his inheritance; the other who worked the father's fields faithfully. Yet the father welcomed them both; the father *forgave* them both, one for running away and losing everything, the other for feeling so entitled to it all. Might this story have *blown the minds* of those who had been taught that God worked through a system of reward and punishment?

Maybe, instead, Jesus talked about injustice—the plight of the poor, the greed of the wealthy who prided themselves on religious purity and blamed poverty on the sins of those in it. Might these words *blow the minds* of those who believed their lot in life, whether rich or poor, was entirely their own doing?

Or maybe Jesus spoke about who is *welcome* in God's kingdom, and named all those who were not even welcome in the synagogue that day. Might such words *blow the minds* of those who separated themselves from “sinners”—in order to remain “clean?”

Maybe Jesus simply said, “*Your sins are forgiven,*” and shocked the sensibilities of the literalists who had no room for grace. Human nature lends itself to small notions about God—*legalistic* ways of understanding our creator—because *often* that's how our world works. There has to be system, a ladder—of some kind—to climb. We *have* to do *this* and *this* and *this* for our reward.

But Jesus blows our minds with the truth of the gospel. We don't have to be perfect potato chips, because God created us a little more unique than that. In the story of creation, God said, “it is good.” Not perfect. GOOD. *Perfect* isn't real. *Perfect* doesn't need anything, or anyone. GOOD, is better. Not perfect, but good. Made in God's image. *What a profound promise.* A blow your mind kind of promise.

Even when the world tells us different: that we have to climb the ladder...Jesus tells us that we're saved by grace. That: God did **not** create us only to watch from a far, waiting for us to slip up; God did **not** create us with so many flaws that we have to spend our whole lives trying to be someone else; God did **not** create a world where those who are sick, or poor, or suffering are so because of some divine punishment. **That's not the face of God we see in Jesus.** Jesus comes be our “ah ha” moment; to blow our minds with the truth of God for us.

You know, that demon-possessed man in our synagogue that day? He wasn't the only one who left healed. Jesus freed—healed—many that day. **Where, in your life, do you need healing?** What is making you feel small, afraid, insufficient? May you hear the PROMISE: that Christ will to be at work in you; made in the image of God: GOOD; held in God's love and grace: FOREVER; CALLED, as you are, to proclaim that truth. May it blow your mind, and **free** you for faith, service and love. Amen.