

'This is my house now'

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany and the Ascension Annual Meeting • January 31, 2021
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Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and 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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They 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." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. - Mark 1:21-28

The entertainment wrestling world was in for a big surprise in 2015. A young English wrestler who went by the name Paige had mostly been known as a homely underdog and loser. But she found her fire in a time of trial, and because of it her story was dramatized in a 2019 movie, *Fighting with my Family*.

In the movie's climactic scene, Paige is put in the ring as snack food for the long-reigning champion, AJ Lee ... and she pulls off a stunning victory. After the bell, Paige struts around the ring with the stadium mic and shouts to the crowd: "[*This victory*] ... belongs to anyone who ever felt like ... the outsiders, the ones that don't belong." Paige then stares down her vanquished adversary, and, still addressing the crowd, she shouts: "My name is Paige. And this is my house now!"

I know that I'm taking a risk by using a women's wrestling story to start a message that I want you to take seriously, but I'm sticking with it. That last line from Paige recalled for me a line from Jesus, in the only story we have in any of the gospels about his early adolescence.

As Luke tells it, Jesus was twelve when he separated himself from his parents after a family pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph searched for three days before finding him in the Temple. " ... [W]hy have you treated us like this?" Mom asks Jesus, "... your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' [Jesus] said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'"

These are the only words we have in Scripture from the childhood or adolescence of Jesus: 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' An entire sermon could be devoted to explaining the significance of the Temple and the theological import of these words on the lips of Jesus. Suffice it to say for now that his words were spoken not only to his parents but to all who must have been listening, and to future readers. Jesus is saying, "*This is my house now.*"

The same message is implicit in the scene described in today's gospel. This scene takes place nearly two decades later, and it is from Mark, not Luke, and the context is not the Temple in Jerusalem but a small-town synagogue in Galilee. Even so, here as in the Temple scene from Luke, the author is still introducing us to Jesus. We aren't told what Jesus taught that day, but in word and deed he is arguably saying, '*This is my house now.*'

As he does so, a gathering place for going through the tired obligations of religion suddenly comes alive. Hearts begin to open with curiosity, love and hope. "*They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*"

Then along comes one of *the outsiders, the ones that don't belong*, as Paige might say. It's a demoniac. The exuberance pauses. And then, curiously, this demoniac, or the unclean spirit

that has become housed in him, makes the first testimony of Christ's divinity, apart from John the Baptist, in Mark's gospel. "I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

Jesus does not avoid, condemn or dismiss the demoniac. Instead, he directly wrestles with the unclean spirit. It's not much of a match: "Be silent, and come out of him!" The divine authority already heard in his teaching is now shown in a powerful act of healing and sanity. Jesus is staring down our ancient foe, and all his cohort who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Jesus is saying to the man, "You are my house now."

Seeing the text in this way may lead us to wonder what or who has taken up residence in us – what life-limiting or life-giving memories, beliefs, expectations, habits or spirits, clean or unclean? Whose house are we, or do we wish to be?

These notions and questions partly come to my mind on this day of our annual meeting because of how we who take part at Ascension love this place, this building, this altar. For so many of us this is the place where we can imagine Jesus saying, "This is my house." Familiarity and reverence uniquely coexist here. And this is the house of God from which most of you have been separated for nearly a year now.

Hard as this has been, I have noticed two pervasive blessings over these long months. First, we've all been blessed by our Wardens, our Vestry members and Treasurer, our priests, deacons and seminarian, our archivist, our staff, including our musicians, and others who have no formal title or role. In word and deed, even before the pandemic and in new ways since, you have been asking and answering the question, "How can we keep this house of God alive and intact?"

Worthy as this preservation and sustaining has been, I also notice another development and blessing over the past year. It's the recognition or reminder that God's house is wherever we are, and in particular wherever two or three are gathered together – whether in person, socially distanced, or virtually – genuinely connecting with one another in faith.

As one example among many, I've seen these connections-in-faith among those of you who agreed at the start of the pandemic to call one or two people every week. You thought it might be for three or four weeks! Now, ten months later, you are still calling and connecting. I've also seen God's house taking shape and sustained in the community that has formed around the Daily Office, shared virtually. I often notice there, and some of you have reported, the same faithful meeting place of familiarity and reverence that I mentioned earlier.

In the context of this annual meeting and our vision and mission at Ascension, I hasten to add that this house of God of which I speak was never meant by Christ to be either a fortress or a museum. It is meant to be a place of mission, a place from which we go forth, whether literally or virtually, to make Christ known in word in deed to others who have felt themselves to be, or who our society has deemed to be, as Paige says, *the outsiders, the ones that don't belong*, the same ones who were so often sought out, welcomed or healed and made whole by Jesus.

Like all of you, I wish all of this would have ended when we first thought it would end. I wish that after we returned in September we would not have had to leave again in November. I, like so many of you, want to see and hear the Choir of the Ascension again: Live! Up in the loft! With the pews filled! I want to see your faces through a cloud of incense. I know and believe that you are here with me now, virtually. But I wish that you were *here* with me today.

Eager as I am to gather here with you again, I pray that when we do gather here again we will recall and retain some of the new ways we are learning to be and to gather as God's house. **Amen.**