

# The Perfect Place for Imperfect People

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Mark 1:21-28

February 1, 2009

(The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany)

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and rite spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Last Sunday afternoon some folks from here went to visit a church in the fair city of Barboursville, West Virginia. And on the way to that church, we passed another church. And it was a Methodist Church, too. First United Methodist Church -- isn't that a catchy name? I always wanted to be the pastor of a church with a name like that. Anyway, there is a pastor right here in the Valley who was pastor there right before he came here. And he was born and raised somewhere in the north or north central part of the state. Where, according to the most recent

statistics, the Methodists are the densest in all of West Virginia. But, he lives in Charleston now ... so that may have changed.

Some of you know him. Monty Brown is his name. And Monty is a wonderful pastor. One of our best. And when he was in Barboursville, some other pastors from Huntington would find a reason to drive out to Barboursville just to read his sermon titles out on the bulletin board in front of the church. Because some of them were corkers. Really. Like the Sunday his sermon was called **Samson, Delilah, and the Bad Hair Day**. Or this one: **God so Loved the World that He Did Not Send a Committee**. And there was one a few years ago, out there on the board, that said, **If You're Looking for a Sign from God, This Is It**. But my favorite was from the week before Palm Sunday, when the gospel reading was from John 11, the raising of Lazarus. And the sermon was entitled, **Lazarus Stinks! How About You?**

Another pastor was driving along up in Wisconsin, I think, and he saw a lovely old church with a beautiful steeple, pretty as a picture. And as he came closer to it he could see the sign board there on the corner. And it

wasn't a sermon title, really. It was just a brief message for anyone who might happen to see it. It said:

**YOU AREN'T TOO BAD TO COME IN:  
YOU AREN'T GOOD ENOUGH TO STAY OUT.**

You aren't too bad to come in. And you're not good enough to stay out ... It reminds me of an old fellow named Sam who left the cold and snow of the hills behind for the warm, sunny days of the South. (Oh, doesn't that sound good?) And the Methodists there are pretty dense, too. He'd drive through town and see a Methodist Church on every corner, nearly.

So he started visiting some of them on Sundays. And some of them were a little too "high church" for him. Rigid and formal. And some of the others were just the opposite, I think. Folks sitting around in Bermuda shorts, sipping ice tea. Every Sunday he tried to find a church he could fit in to. But he wasn't having a whole lot of luck. And to tell you the truth, he was just about ready to stop looking. He'd just call it quits. Home church himself with TV preachers, I suppose.

And then one Sunday he dropped into a church a few minutes late. And just as he did, he heard a voice from the

pulpit say, "We have left undone the things we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done." And with that Sam let go of a hearty "hallelujah!" and said, "Thank you, Lord! I've found my crowd at last!"

There was a young family who went through the same thing, I guess, when they moved across town. Because they were looking for a church to join, too. But it was different for them. Sam didn't know anyone. But they had grown up in that place and they knew lots of folks there -- even some preachers. And everyone wanted them to come visit their church. So they did. They went to several churches. And it wasn't an easy choice to make. But they finally decided where they wanted to make their "church home."

But they couldn't join that Sunday. Because a friend had invited them to come to their church that weekend for a special service they were having. Ground Hog Sunday, I guess. Or the Super Bowl of Baptism, maybe. Anyway, it was a special service, so they waited one more week while they went to visit the Lutheran church, where their friend was a member. And on the way there, they were talking about all of this -- about becoming members

of the church and being part of a new church family. And the older of their two sons leaned forward and said, “Is joining the church when we walk down the aisle and people shake your hand, and the old ladies hug us?” And the father said, “Yes. That’s it. And we’ll be ding that before you know it,” he said. And that was that. He had it all figured out.

And this little boy, who felt so much like a big boy, slipped out of the pew as they sang the hymn of invitation after the sermon. He just slipped out of his pew, all by himself, and started down the aisle.

His mom said, “Where’s he going?”

“To the restroom, I’m sure,” answered the father.

And the mom said, “Honey, I don’t *think* so. *I* think he’s headed straight for the pastor...

The father said, “Oh no! *He* thought I meant we were joining *this* church *this morning*... Oh honey, get him before he gets to the pastor!”

But it was too late. The kid was up there wearing a big toothy grin, and telling the preacher that his family was joining the church -- “This morning,” he said. And so the

father turned with a pathetic sort of smile, shrugged his shoulders, and motioned for the rest of the family to come forward, too... So, you never know. You may meet a young family some day who will laugh and tell you how they joined the wrong church -- which turned out to be the perfect place for them. ✠

Something like that happened years ago at a lakeside chapel up North where all the fisherman lived -- in a little town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. A place called Capernaum. Hometown of Peter and Andrew. And it was on a Saturday, which was their Sunday. The Lord’s Day. The Sabbath it was. And that morning at eleven o’clock (or whatever it was,) they introduced the guest speaker. A rabbi. A teacher from Nazareth, they said. He stood up and read the scripture of the day. And then he sat down to teach them.

And they were just spellbound, I think They’d never heard anything like it. Because they were used to hearing the scribes put their spin on the scriptures. But this man, this Jesus, had them in the palm of his hand. As if he was the real authority on God. It was as if Jesus knew, I mean really knew about God and God’s word and God’s way in

our lives. It was as if he brought these old, ancient words to life. And they were amazed. Hanging on every word...

And just then some man in the congregation jumped out of his seat and shouted. He shouted! But not with a hale and hearty “hallelujah” like Sam, mind you. This fellow was yelling at Jesus. The teacher. A guest in their house. “Jesus!” he shouted. “What do you want from us? What do you want from us?” ✠ It wasn’t a pretty thing. People don’t do that. Not in CHURCH! It’s God’s house, not yours! Mind your manners. Show a little respect, for heaven’s sake. Or as my dear mother-in-law used to say, “Act like you’ve got some sense!”

But he didn’t. he couldn’t. The poor man was just out of control! People were sitting there trying to think about their Lord and his Word. But now all they can think of is... What’s wrong with this guy? What in the world’s gotten into this man? ✠ But some of them knew. An unclean spirit had control of this man. In the church! A man with an unclean spirit ... a foul, polluted, ungodly somebody in God’s house ... and on the Sabbath! That wasn’t his crowd! He didn’t fit there, I tell you! This man was in the wrong church! The wrong place! I mean, God’s house is the last place you’d expect to find somebody like that.

In fact, my grandma Jones told me about a church she had seen somewhere in New England that went to great lengths to see to it that nothing like this would never happen in their church. Their church, she said, was round. And they built it that way, she said, so the devil couldn’t hide in the corner.... It made sense, I thought. A little too much sense. So much that it made me worry about our church ... in Wayne. Which was square. With lots of corners. All over the building.

And then it dawned on me that it was a good thing we had them. For without a corner to hide in, the old devil’d be right out there in the middle of everything. In the church. Can you imagine? (Oh, can you imagine?)

So there he was, a man possessed. Out of control. His life taken over by something he couldn’t even see. And no matter how hard he fought and struggled against it, he just wasn’t able to free himself from it. Oh, can you imagine? It was destroying his life. That’s why they called it an *unclean* spirit. Because it soiled and polluted everything -- from his life to his relationships and even his spirit, his relationship with God. Everything was tainted. Every part of his life was tarnished -- like someone trapped by shame or fear, or someone held prisoner to drugs or

alcohol or gambling or lust. People don't want to be miserable. They don't want to be all alone in the world. And they hate what it does to them, I think. And to the people around them. But sometimes willpower just isn't enough.

And people knew that back then. They had a lot more savvy, a lot more sense, than we give them credit for, I think. Because in those days they thought that the only thing that could free someone from one of these unclean spirits was a greater spirit. A more powerful spirit.

And where was this man with the unclean spirit? In a church -- a synagogue -- the House of the Lord. He was in a place where Jesus was ... the perfect place for imperfect people. Isn't that what Paul said when he wrote, **Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities ... nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from God's love? from God's love for us in Christ Jesus?** Oh, what better place could there be for that man than to be in the Lord's house? with the Lord's people? In the very place where Jesus was. For only something greater, more powerful, with more authority could free him from his demons! And in this plain, ordinary

woodworker from Nazareth was the power, and authority, and the healing presence of God.

"What do you want with us?" they shrieked. "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are," said the demon. "You are the Holy One -- the Holy One of God," they screamed. For they knew that there is nothing more powerful than the One whose name to us is Love.

And that's how it is with all the unclean "spirits" that take control of our lives. Willpower alone just isn't enough. It takes something greater, something more powerful...

It's the first of the Twelve Steps on Alcoholics Anonymous, you know, (and in all the other recovery programs that have grown out of it). The first step is to admit that you're powerless -- that you have no power over this "thing" whatever it is. And the second is to know that there is a higher power -- one that can heal and restore and make all things new. And it has a name. You know the name. His name means God saves, God rescues, God delivers, God heals ....

So there in the synagogue Jesus said, "Hush ... Be quiet ... Come out of this man." And the poor man was shaken.

Thrashed about by this thing. And then it cried out. And it left him. Right there in the synagogue, the man was made whole. On a Sabbath Day morning in the house of the Lord.

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and rite spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

Well, here we are on a Sabbath Day morning, in the House of the Lord. And it's the right place to be. The perfect place for people like us. Because Jesus is here in this place. I don't mean memories or thoughts, or ideas about him. I mean *he* is here. Now. In this very place. Even though we're so much less than perfect. Even though we are sinners. Even though there are unclean spirits that would keep us from being the church, the people God created us to be... Jesus is here. And because he is, this is the place for us. Not because we're so much like him, mind you. But because we need him so much.

For at times, I think, we're just overwhelmed with life. Overpowered by things unclean that would keep us from

being whole. Things that just move in and take over our lives like being bitter toward someone, or so critical of others, so petty, so jealous, so unloving, says Paul. Or maybe they have names like worry and fear, or alcohol and drugs. Or they may even have names like discouragement, or depression. Or the one that says, "I'm no good. I'm a loser. I don't even matter."

They're unclean. They are. They can move in on us inch by inch until we're controlled by them. And they begin to destroy our hopes and our dreams, our relationships, even, with the people we love. It happens. It does. It happens to people like us. And that's why the Church is the perfect place for us. Because there is a higher-power here in this place. And his name is Jesus. God with us. And no power on earth, **Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

The church is the perfect place for people who don't belong there. It's the perfect place for people whose lives are so far from perfection. The perfect place for hopeless causes and impossible dreams. Because Jesus is here. And

here is a love so great that it was willing to take our place on the cross at Golgotha. There is power and authority in a love like that -- power to heal and restore and make all things new.

It happens. I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable, mind you. But it happens here. Have you seen it? Miracles happen. Life-changing stuff. I've noticed children from the community being transformed in this place. And people find healing. They do. Relationships broken beyond repair being mended here by the power of that same love. Someone who'd nearly given up on the world laughing and singing and speaking God's praise. And people nearly defeated by illness, full of life and living with strength. I've even seen them give strength to others. I have.

And mind you, some people here are pretty strong-willed, but willpower alone can't do all of that. It takes something more powerful, something greater -- you know that. And that something greater is the loving presence of Jesus our Lord.

It's time now to see that. It's time to nurture that love here -- in each other. It's time to open our eyes to see it, our hearts to feel it, our minds to believe it. And it's time

now to open the door of God's house and say to every person God sends us, "You couldn't have come to a better place. It's the perfect place for you. Because Jesus is here."

There's a church like that in Kansas City, I think. It's one of our downtown churches out there. It was a good location at one time, I suppose. But all of that changed over the years. The community changed. And the church declined. But when the young new pastor came to the church, they started a program for children there in the inner city. It was a lot like **WOW**, I think. There were fun things to do, and plenty of food, and Bible stories, and singing, and even some puppets. And it grew and grew. Forty-five, fifty, sixty children after school every time with food and fun times and singing and stories from the bible.

And one day a mother came up to this young minister and said, "Are you the one running this program?"

"Yes ma'am," he said.

"My son's in this program," she said.

And the young pastor said, "Well, we're so glad to have him." He said, "We're having a really good time here with the kids. I hope he's having a good time."

And for a moment she just stood there with this stern, cold look on her face. And then she said, “Well, he can play the games, and he can eat the food. But I don’t want him listening to any of those stories.”

The poor man didn’t know what to think. It wasn’t what he was expecting her to say. He was just dumbfounded, I think. And then he said, “Well, ma’am, we just get them from the bible. They’re just Bible stories,” he said.

And she snapped at him. “Well, I’m his mother and I don’t want him listening to any more of those stories.”

And the preacher said, “But ma’am, I don’t think you understand. We’re not trying to indoctrinate him. We’re just telling Bible stories. That’s all.”

And the boy’s mother said, “You don’t understand. He’s gotten to the point where he’s coming home, thinking he’s as good as anybody else in Kansas City. You’ve got the kid thinking he’s somebody. And you’re just setting him up for a bitter disappointment. I don’t want him to hear those stories anymore.”

Isn’t it sad? It was the perfect place for him. A miracle was taking place at that church. A healing as great as any

healing on earth. Because Jesus was there. The One whose love had the power to take what was broken in that child’s mind and restore it, so that he might know that he *is* somebody -- somebody God loves, somebody God cares for, the apple of his eye.

It was the perfect place for a kid like that -- the perfect place for his mother, too. If only she knew that. If only she could see it. If only she could see that Jesus was there.

Oh, and if only we could see it... This is the perfect place for lost causes and hopeless cases, for broken hearts and wounded spirits -- and it’s the perfect place for people like us. Do you see it? Do you know? Jesus is here.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

*Benen, ObLSB*

