



Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
www.trinitylutheran.ca

January 28, 2024
Fourth Sunday in Epiphany
Reconciling in Christ Sunday

Announcements

Today's Service is one to mark Reconciling in Christ (RIC) Sunday. This is a day set aside for congregations that have been designated as RIC congregations and those working toward such a designation (something being discerned by Trinity's council) to affirm their commitment to being communities that intentionally invite and welcome members of the 2S *LGBTQIA+ community*.

Annual Congregational Meeting is set for Sunday February 4. The meeting is an opportunity for you to share your voice as Trinity and its ministry moves into the post-Covid world. As well, council elections will take place during the meeting. The report is available at the church and will be emailed following the January 8 service. Proxy forms will also be available for those who cannot attend the meeting.

Shrove Pancake Supper is scheduled for 5 - 7 p.m. Tuesday, February 13. Invite your friends and family to this meal before we begin our Lenten journey toward the cross.

Lenten Messy Church is planned for Wednesday, February 21. This is a mid-week alternative worship for families of all types and sizes. Messy Church involves a meal, activities, crafts, a quiet area and a brief worship. Please let Pastor Chris or Donna know if you would like to attend or help with the event.

We Remember in our Prayers

In Residence: Cordelle, Dorothy, Katie, Margaret, Sharon, Vern.

Members: Bunny, Donna, Ed, Joan, Susan, Evelyn

Friends & Family: Anna, Asdis, Audrey, Dot, Jean, Mary, Michelle, Randy, Roger, Rose

Introduction to the day

In Deuteronomy God promises to raise up a prophet like Moses, who will speak for God; in Psalm 111 God shows the people the power of God's works. For the church these are ways of pointing to the unique authority people sensed in Jesus' actions and words. We encounter that authority in God's word, around which we gather, the word that prevails over any lesser spirit that would claim power over us, freeing us to follow Jesus.

Suggested Hymns

WOV # 788 Glory to God
ELW # 641 All Are Welcome
ELW # 715 Christ Be Our Light
For Everyone Born
ELW # 841 Lift Every Voice & Sing

Prayer of the day

Holy and Living God, we open to you this day.
May peace flow and let justice roll down like an ever-flowing stream. Open our eyes and help us to see that no one is outside your love or outside our love. Remind us that we are not alone thanks to your abiding presence, through Jesus Christ, the free gift of grace.

AMEN

First Reading: Amos 5: 21-24

²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²² Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Psalm 111

¹ Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the Lord with ¹ my whole heart,
in the assembly of the upright, in the ¹ congregation.

² **Great are your ¹ works, O Lord,
pondered by all who de- ¹ light in them.**

³ Majesty and splendor ¹ mark your deeds,
and your righteousness en- ¹ dures forever.

⁴ **You cause your wonders to ¹ be remembered;
you are gracious and full ¹ of compassion.**

⁵ You give food to ¹ those who fear you, remembering forev- ¹ er your covenant.

⁶ **You have shown your people the power ¹ of your works
in giving them the lands ¹ of the nations.**

⁷ The works of your hands are faithful- ¹ ness and justice;
all of your pre- ¹ cepts are sure.

⁸ **They stand fast forev- ¹ er and ever,
because they are done in ¹ truth and equity.**

⁹ You sent redemption to your people and commanded your cove- ¹ nant forever;

holy and awesome ¹ is your name.

¹⁰ **The fear of the Lord is the begin- ¹ ning of wisdom;
all who practice this have a good understanding. God's praise en- ¹ dures forever.**

Second reading: Romans 8: 31-39

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.^[a] ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

²¹ [Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one

having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Sermon

Lesson of love

This morning we mark what is called Reconciling in Christ Sunday. It's a day when congregations who have been designated RIC congregations celebrate their ongoing work of welcome, inclusion, celebration, and advocacy for 2SLGBTQIA+ people in the life of the church.

For congregations, such as Trinity, RIC Sunday is an opportunity to recognize their shortcomings and affirm their desire to work toward being more welcoming and inclusive. The RIC designation is a nice perk, but the work itself is what is important.

Over the span of a couple of years the council at my last congregation was a particularly progressive group.

The council recognized that the congregation had blindspots and didn't

invite or welcome people the way it should – unless they were similar to those people already in the pews.

So, the council decided to begin working toward a RIC designation.

Still, one long-tenured member of the council argued against such an effort.

He proclaimed, “We say ‘all are welcome. That should be enough.’ ”

... that should be enough.

I am sure there might be some at Trinity who might be thinking the same thing as we ponder the hard work that lay ahead.

So, let me share a short story or at least as short as my stories are....

I was finishing a confirmation course with three young people about four years ago.

They had completed the two-year program and we had walked through their confirmation service so they knew what to do during the service when the mother of one of the young girls called the office.

“She doesn’t want to be confirmed,” the mother says.

I asked, “Is something wrong?”

There was a long pause ... “She’s questioning her faith.”

She had been baptized and brought up in the congregation ... attended confirmation classes and you wouldn’t expect her to suddenly begin questioning faith.

I offered to help her daughter work through her doubts and questions any time she needed, but the young woman just stopped attending services ... we didn’t see her for more than two years.

Now, remember that I said the congregation’s council was working toward the RIC designation. As part of the effort, council decided to sponsor the

local Pride festival ... which it did two years in a row.

This, by the way, is something Trinity’s last council says they want to do, as well.

Besides walking in the parade ... the congregation received a table in the street fair.

We handed out cookies and other sweets ... people collected information about the church ... they were invited to check out the congregation ... and ... perhaps best of all ... the members who were taking care of the table were able to hear the stories of those who have been hurt by family ... by former friends ... and even by their church.

I spotted the young woman at the first PrideFest ... she came to the table to grab a cookie. We had a brief chat about school and family and she moved off into the crowd.

Last spring, she appeared at the table during the second PrideFest we helped sponsor. This time our chat was a bit longer and more about what was going on at the church. This time she heard the words “we miss you.”

She was at the service of healing and inclusion the next morning.

She became a regular attendee ... arriving with her mother ... sitting in their regular pew.

She hadn’t really been questioning her faith ... she had been questioning her faith family.

I was packing up my office one afternoon after I announced my move to Trinity, when her mother stopped by.

We chatted about her daughters ... one at university and the other entering the final year of high school. She handed me two cards before she left ... one from her and the family ... the other from the young woman.

In the second card was a small piece of artwork made from seeds. The card said she had been afraid of what people in the congregation would think or say if they knew her orientation ... what would be said to her mother.

But because she saw congregation members at the PrideFest ... because we listened ... because we invited ... because we missed her ... she felt supported and safe enough to return to the only faith family she knew.

The congregation had been saying "all are welcome" ... clearly, saying it hadn't been enough. Living that message was also necessary.

So how does this young person's story fit into this morning's story from Mark?

We heard how Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum ... a town on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. Being a teacher and it being the sabbath, Jesus went to the synagogue to share his wisdom.

Then, a man possessed by an unclean spirit appears. Jesus rebukes the spirit ... tells it to be silent ... and to leave.

We're told that those in attendance were astounded by what they heard ... and "amazed" by what they witnessed. Clearly, Jesus caught people's attention because afterward word of his authority spreads across the region.

Now, there are a number of ways to view the person who had been possessed by the unclean spirits. But there are two ways that should interest us here this morning.

We can see the person as someone who has been excluded from the

worship life of the community ... and because he has been ... he has also been pushed aside in the community outside the synagogue.

After all, because he is possessed by an unclean spirit, he is ritually unclean and cannot enter a synagogue or the temple. Being unclean would also mean that people would avoid him out of a sense of fear.

On one level, this passage is about Jesus pulling those unclean spirits from the man ... healing him so that he can become a full participant in the worship life of the synagogue and in the life of the community.

But if we look at this passage through a different lens?

What if we turn it around and look outward a bit more?

What if the person at the door of the synagogue was keeping people from entering the place of worship?

What if the spirit represented those things that keep people from the doors to the sanctuary ... from the love and support of a faith community?

What if the unclean spirit was actually a force of exclusion?

People would see this man in the doorway ... or in the worship space of the synagogue and avoid them for fear of being affected or hurt or even declared unclean, as well.

So, when Jesus tells the unclean spirits to be silent and leave ... ridding the man of his sinful spirits ... Jesus is also healing the place of worship ... removing the things that kept the man and others from God.

It's interesting that while some hear this story and think of words such as "healing" and even "exorcise" ... Mark uses the word "teaching."

Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit's words ... and in the bargain offers a

lesson to the gathering ... a lesson about the cleansing abilities and inclusive nature of God's steadfast love ... a love that restores people ... a love that teaches.

Jesus taught the gathering a new approach ... one not based in tradition as the scribes taught ... but one based on God's promise to the people remaining in place for all who come in faith.

It was a lesson that healed the man and perhaps even a community.

As Trinity continues through the Reconciling in Christ process, we will hear such healing lessons.

As a congregation, those things that keep people from being full participants in a faith community ... or from even being part of the community ... need to be exorcised.

These are the unclean spirits that can diminish a community as it easily as they can an individual.

Things such as suspicion ... assumption ... anger ... prejudice ... self-interest ... indifference ... are the spirits that can possess us.

These are the spirits that need to be removed so that the doors can be thrown open to all who come looking for a place to belong ... a place where they feel heard and valued.

Lately, some of our members have taken to saying "All are welcome ... and we mean it."

I believe we all should mean it ... because God's grace ... God's love ... is not a conditional relationship. We are called to invite ... to welcome ... and to love our neighbours through our support and advocacy and we cannot do this in silence.

The love we are called to share is intended to be an active, vocal love ... it is a love that teaches by example.

In grace and in love ... through the lessons we hear ... we exorcise such spirits ... the negative garbage that piles up in lives and blocks hearts from being touched and from fully embracing relationships with one another and with God.

In grace and in love ... all are welcome ... and we mean it.

AMEN

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever and ever.

AMEN

Blessing

May the outrageous welcome of our Creator
+ accept and love us for who we are;
may the incarnation of the Word
touch and hold us close;
may the dancing flicker of the rainbow Spirit
help us risk ourselves for love;
and the blessing of God
now and forever.

AMEN