

Sermon For January 29, 2012

Mark 1:21-28

By What Authority?

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A few weeks ago Parade Magazine ran an interview with actor Daniel Radcliffe. Radcliffe is best known for playing the role of the young wizard, Harry Potter, in that wildly successful movie franchise. As I was glancing over this article I was surprised that the interviewer asked about Daniel Radcliffe's religious background. The interviewer said: Your dad is a Protestant from Ulster and your mom is English and Jewish. Were you raised in a particular religion? Radcliffe answered this question, saying, "There was never religious faith in the house. I think of myself as being Jewish and Irish, despite the fact that I'm English."

Radcliffe's next comment intrigued me. He said, "My dad believes in God, I think. I'm not sure if my mom does. I don't. I have a problem with religion or anything else that says, "We have all the answers," because there's no such thing as "the answers." We're complex. We change our minds on issues all the time. Religion leaves no room for human complexity."

There is much about this response that I find interesting. I am surprised that a 22-year-old young adult would not know whether his parents believed in God or not. While I understand that these people are from Europe, it seems that they might have discussed this topic at some point.

What I find even more interesting in this response is Danielle Radcliffe's understanding of religion. Even though Mr. Radcliffe was not raised in a religious household, he has some very strong opinions about what religion is. Specifically, that religion attempts to give people all of the answers and leaves no room for the complexities of human existence.

I am not surprised that an un-churched young person would have this understanding about religion. Without ever having participated in an organized religion, young people are bombarded with messages as to what organized religion is. The viewpoint that Radcliffe holds is portrayed in the media, in movies, and is proclaimed by television preachers.

I would love to have the opportunity to sit down and talk with Daniel Radcliffe, and any other young person who believes that religion oppressively gives you all of the answers. I would share with him that I do not believe this to be true and that in fact I see religion as providing a community of faith in which to explore the great questions of life and faith.

I agree with Daniel Radcliffe that no one has all of the answers, but I am also humble enough to know that on my own I can create the universe in my own image. By connecting to a community of faith I can learn from the wisdom and example of other people. People who experience the same joys and challenges of life that I do. The long tradition of religion, whatever its particular branch, challenges us to see beyond our own narrow viewpoints and opens us to new possibilities.

The conflict that Daniel Radcliffe has with religion is illustrated in this morning's reading from Mark. In this reading we find a group of religious scribes who have been trained to be interpreters of the Mosaic Law. Through their education they have grown confident in their ability to provide the "answers."

For years these individuals have been recognized as religious authorities. This authority is challenged when Jesus teaches in the synagogue in Capernaum. Other people quickly perceive that Jesus is teaching with a different kind of authority. An authority that does not come from a formal education, but from a heart of faith.

The scribes are further challenged in their thinking when Jesus chooses to break one of the commandments by healing a man on the Sabbath. Our reading doesn't explain why Jesus chooses to do this. My conclusion is that Jesus saw a human need and responded to it. Rather than be limited by the letter of the law, Jesus responds out of God's love. This man, who had been forced out of community, because of an unclean spirit, is now brought back into community. I can just imagine the questions that were raised in the minds of the people that day in the synagogue.

Is religion about providing all of the answers, or is it about bringing us into a closer relationship with God? A relationship in which we recognize that we are all loved by God, and that we are called by God to love others.

One of my favorite authors, Quaker Pastor Philip Gulley, reflects my understanding of religion. Having once believed that religion had all of the answers, Gulley writes, "Though I remain a Christian, one who has come to know God through the life and teachings of Jesus, I've accepted my proper place as a seeker of truth rather than the possessor of all wisdom. My curiosity is growing."

Gulley goes on to say, "Gracious religion isn't an unbending allegiance to a narrow orthodoxy. It is about approaching our life with God and others in a spirit of gentleness, humility, and openness. These tools become the means by which God fits us for citizenship in the world and God's kingdom. It is about being less

committed to a rigid, self-concerned institution and more concerned about authenticity, integrity and faith.

This faith is not about believing the right things about God, but about trusting God to remake us in God's image, full of grace and truth. Its goal is not dogmatic certainty, but making our peace with a great mystery – that God's simple truth is revealed in a multiplicity of forms. All of these forms reflect a common conviction – that we are most like God when we love each other.”

(If God is Love, Philip Gulley, Harper San Francisco, 2004, p. 137)

What Philip Gulley is describing is what I see happening in our reading from Mark. Jesus is not bound by the rigid laws of the faith. Rather, he is motivated by the love of God to help an individual who has been excluded by community. Through his example, Jesus frees us from being bound to a rigid set of answers, so that we can live the loving grace of God.

If I had to live according to a religion based on Daniel Radcliffe's understandings, I wouldn't want anything to do with it. I am suspicious of anyone, or any institution, that claims to have all the answers. For me, a religion that proclaims to have all of the answers leaves no room for the spirit.

I would love to be able to invite Daniel Radcliffe to come our church. If he attended a Bible Study, a Confirmation Class, or worship, he would learn that not all religions proclaim to have “the answers.”

I know that there are a lot of people like Daniel Radcliffe, both old and young, who dismiss religion because they perceive it to be a rigid set of answers. They either learned this in childhood, or they have believed what others tell them.

I hope that we will continue to find ways to invite such people to come and explore their faith with us. For I believe that in coming together we learn more about what it means to be loved by God, and what it means to share God's love with others.