

Connecting With the Sunday Readings

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus walks into a local synagogue and as is the custom in such places, he is asked to offer a few comments on the readings. We don't know what they were. All we are told is that the locals were quite impressed with what he said. It wasn't "the same old stuff." Rather, it opened up a new way of thinking. Something new was in the air.

So this week, let's think of whether we are so stuck in our old ways of thinking and acting that we don't leave room for anything new. For many reasons we tend to settle into a routine. We do the same thing every day. Ask yourself, for instance, what are the first five things you do each day? Are they always the same? It's not a bad thing to fly on autopilot, especially at the beginning of the day when all our circuits may not yet be functioning. But if routine becomes the basic way we are all the time, then we might want to step back and ask whether God is bringing us some new opportunities for a deeper life, and we're just not noticing.

A Gospel Word for the Home

Mark 1:21–28

Besides presenting the theme of newness, today's Gospel reading describes Jesus as he meets a man with an "unclean spirit." Scholars tell us that this is a general term used to describe anyone who behaved differently, or bizarre. Maybe he was mentally ill. Maybe he had a brain abnormality. Maybe he was possessed by an evil spirit. In those days, the custom was to stay clear of such individuals. Their condition was thought to be contagious. Jesus, against the prevailing custom, went to the man and rebuked the unclean spirit to "...Be silent, and come out of him" (Mark 1:25). And it did. The Gospel records that those who witnessed this were astonished. They were stunned.

From the beginning of his public life, Jesus was revealed as being different. His words and deeds go against popular custom, even those associated with religion. When connecting with the person of unclean spirit, Jesus transcends the customary limitations and boundaries. He wanted to do something helpful for the possessed man, so he broke the rules and made contact. We are often faced with opportunities to do good, but instead we pull back out of fear, or consider it an uncustomary thing to do.

Sometimes as children get older, they become more withdrawn from family activities. They go into their shell, like a turtle seeking protection. It's not easy to know what's best to do: Leave them there, or draw them out? Jesus seems to say it's better to connect, which is generally a better way to be in a family.

Parent Survival

Many parents are now familiar with what are called “boundary issues.” Boundaries refer to the closeness or distance we establish between ourselves and others. We tend to be close to our families but more distant with strangers. Fine-tuning these boundaries is often difficult in the family. For example, older children have the tendency to become more distant; the closed door of their bedroom may symbolize a new boundary for them.

It is important for parents to be proactive with this, question it, discuss it, and keep it as a matter of family concern. There are no simple rules for this, but the process should not be ignored or left to happenstance. Teens see and hear so much that reinforces separation between them and their parents. The key is to keep the lines of communication open, to recognize the positive aspects of the move toward greater teen autonomy, and to be alert to signs of too much separation, much like Jesus did for the person with the so-called “unclean spirit.”

Car or Meal Talk

Do we have good boundaries in our family? Does everyone in the family agree with them? Let’s talk about this.

One-Line Prayer

God, Our Loving Father,
Help us to be open to all the opportunities you send us to be kind and to be more loving.
Amen.