

**Mark 1:21-28; RIC Sunday; 4 Epiphany; January 31, 2021**  
**Rich Weingartner**

Grace to you and peace from God our parent, Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

First, I want to just say a quick “hi” to all of you out there. While I certainly wish that we could be worshipping in person, I am thankful for technology and the people who operate it (thanks Ken!) so that we can still gather virtually each Sunday. I miss seeing you every week during worship, choir rehearsals, or other events. Just a note that to be 100% safe, I recorded my parts of the service at home ahead of Sunday, so while you are watching this on Sunday morning, I’m watching it right with you!

Now, taking a quick look at our old testament reading from today, it focuses on prophets and God providing prophets for the people as they get ready to go into the promised land. God wants to make sure that God’s people are given guidance as they go into land that has many rituals around false gods. Because of this, there needs to be a true voice to guide them as they build their community around God’s plan. We learn what makes a good prophet, which is someone who speaks the truth about God and shares God’s message. So, while we don’t officially declare prophets in these modern times, we can sort of view anyone who declares the truth about God and the love for all people as a type of modern prophet.

Moving to the new testament reading, at a quick glance this may seem like a message about being careful about what we eat or do not eat or how we behave, but the message is bigger than that. We have to remember that this was written to the church in Corinth to give them guidance for their community. What I take away from this passage isn't about strict laws about our behaviors or actions. This is about being aware of our actions and how they impact our community. As children of God, freed by Christ, we are commanded to build up our community to ensure that everyone can know and experience God's love for all. So what we should and should not do is not dictated by a certain list somewhere, but by the outcomes. We need to look at our actions not as the actions themselves but by how they impact our community. Even if an action is fine for ourselves or those close around us, we need to view it as how others perceive it and how it impacts the larger community, to ensure that the actions share the message of God's love and helps bring people closer to the wholeness that God and I yearn for in recognizing the kin-dom of God.

In today's Gospel reading we find Jesus entering the synagogue and teaching. It was not unusual for people other than the leaders of the synagogue to teach during gatherings, it was quite common practice. From a commentary by Richard Donovan "There is only one temple, but synagogues are widely scattered and devoted to the study of scripture. Sabbath worship includes prayer as well as the public reading and exposition of the scriptures. The role of the president of the synagogue is more administrative than pastoral, so he invites qualified laymen to speak. Synagogue rulers

would welcome a fresh, promising voice, which explains how Jesus could teach in the synagogue.” (<https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/mark-121-28/>)

The important part here is that Mark notes that Jesus taught with Authority. Normally only the scribes had authority to interpret scripture. Again, from Richard Donovan, “Scribes are scholars who interpret and teach Torah and render binding judgments regarding its application. They tend to be conservative, rendering judgments based on precedent—deriving authority from their knowledge of earlier experts on the law. By Jesus’ day, they are powerful and enjoy considerable deference. The best seats in the synagogue are reserved for them, and people rise to their feet when they enter a room. People call them “rabbi,” which means “great one”. They constitute a substantial portion of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body. They quickly become Jesus’ opponents, and will play a major role in his crucifixion—in part because they consider Jesus to be sacrilegious, but also because Jesus poses a threat to their comfortable lives.”

This gospel reading, along with last week’s, are the start of Jesus’s public ministry, and boy does he start off with a bang. Not in a safe cautious manner, but already challenging the status quo of the time. Not only by teaching with authority and shocking people, but also by rebuking evil in a person, and achieving results. The actions he did wasn’t the shocking part, it was that he wasn’t part of the “in” crowd, not “authorized” to do this, and didn’t do it the “right way”.

As we follow the ministry of Jesus, we learn that this is exactly what his ministry is all about, doing what is right, breaking down barriers that keep people from God's love and the kin-dom of wholeness, and making sure everyone, especially the "others" that normally didn't fit in, are welcomed to experience the wonder of God's unconditional love.

Which brings us to today, Reconciling in Christ (RIC) Sunday. A yearly service where we focus on and renew our commitment to being an RIC Congregation. This year the theme is "Coming Together, Building Community".

When we became an RIC congregation, the requirement to be officially listed as an RIC congregation was to have a public welcome statement that specifically states that we welcome all sexual orientations and gender identities. Recently, when I was working with another congregation on their journey to becoming RIC, I learned that ReconcilingWorks, the organization that governs the RIC program, has updated the requirements for being RIC. At first, I was a bit concerned, but after I read the updated list, I strongly support it because it is a positive change, and also fits in well with the spirit of RIC and fits well with what our congregation does. The updated list of RIC criteria is:

- Your community explicitly states a welcome to people of "all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions" or "LGBTQIA+" and names its commitment to racial equity or antiracism in its welcome statement.

- Open to calling an LGBTQIA+ and Black, Brown, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) Rostered Leader.
- Will allow community space/sanctuary to be used for LGBTQIA+ weddings and blessings.
- Will make a meaningful contribution annually to support the national RIC program.

While I feel we do well at most of these, we always have room to grow, so I encourage you to think about these commitments as we start another year of programming in our congregation.

When we think back on today's readings, we find that throughout the bible, God's plan for all of us has always been about coming together and building community. Not just any community, but a community where all are welcome, kept safe, and are provided ways to experience God's love and desire for wholeness for everyone. From the old testament when prophets were provided to build and grow a community in a new land, to the new testament where guidance was given as to how to ensure that the community is coming together to build itself up. Then the ultimate example of what it means to come together to build community from Jesus's bold actions and message, that God isn't meant to be separated from people and governed by old rules and strict interpretations of them, but God is meant to have close connections with people in their community and use that connection to build up the community as one.

As we celebrate RIC Sunday this year, I think back to RIC Sunday last year and how I had a very packed day of plans for that Sunday, starting off with church, then our annual meeting with lunch, attending a play, then traveling to Toronto for a short vacation. This RIC Sunday is vastly different, as has been the last year for all of us. While this has certainly been hard for everyone, in many different ways, I also see the positive that has come out of it. This congregation, you, all of you, has stepped up to come together and build community. People adapted and adjusted as needed to ensure the work of our congregation continued. Services were adjusted and readjusted, adjusted again, and changed once more as health guidance, technology, and weather required. We started new programs like treats for health care workers and also demonstrating for racial justice - not just when it was the hot issue of the week, but for months, since just because it fell off the headlines, didn't mean the issue went away. We had a wonderful God's Work. Our Hands. day where we engaged and provided services to our community. We ensured that our annual food drives continued. We increased our efforts to make cards for seniors, now when they need them the most. Our food pantry has helped who knows how many people in need, it continues to gain more attention as people become aware of it and the need in our community increases. We continue to provide and care for the young people living in our parish house, as we continue to work for justice for them. In this past year, we have certainly come together to build community. And through this, we are reminded that the church is certainly not a building, but a community. While our building has been mostly shut down for almost a

year, the church, our community, has certainly not been closed as we've continued to come together (virtually or otherwise) to build community.

And I've said it before, and I'll continue to say it, because it is the truth, Pastor Ellen is a modern day prophet. Her deep care and concern for people, justice, and community is the spark that leads our congregational community to keep working hard to come together to continue to build up God's kin-dom in our community. Her passion and commitment drives us all to keep coming together to do the work that is desperately needed in our community and the world. So, pastor, hopefully, my virtually helping lead today's worship service gives you a small, and much deserved, break. I can just picture you sitting back and relaxing a little bit as you watch the parts of the service I recorded to help out today.

While it would be great to say "well we've done a great job at coming together and building our community, we can step back for awhile", that isn't the case. Until the entire world is made whole and one with God, and all know the freeing, unending and unconditional love of God, our mission continues. We will continue to come together in whatever ways we can and whatever ways are needed to continue building up our community. Our community of people at Faith, our community of people in Okemos, Haslett, Williamston, and surrounding areas, our community of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other People of Color, our community of people from different faith backgrounds, our community of the wide range of sexual orientations and gender

identities and expressions, our community that is best described as everyone, all God's people and all of God's creation. Make no mistake, this is hard work, but work that we are called to do, work that we can do and should be excited to do, because of the Good News that we are freed from our sins, freed from having to worry about always being "right" and doing the "right" thing to maintain connection and earn God's love. We are freed because of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, to bridge the gap between us and God, so we are closely and unbreakably connected with God's love for us. We are freed to come together and build community. Let us challenge ourselves as individuals and as a congregation to work to continue our current plans and find new ways to build up our community to ensure the message of God's love reaches all.

Amen.

We will now sing today's Hymn of the Day - "Oh, Praise the Gracious Power" which is taken from last year's worship service.



