

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – January 28, 2018

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 1:21-28

FOR REFLECTION

"Obedience, in human behavior, is a form of "social influence in which a person yields to explicit instructions or orders from an authority figure". Obedience is generally distinguished from compliance, which is behavior influenced by peers, and from conformity, which is behavior intended to match that of the majority. Depending on context, obedience can be seen as immoral, amoral or moral."

~ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obedience_\(human_behavior\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obedience_(human_behavior))

Influence and Obedience

I swore that, when I became a mother, I would never tell my child to do something and, when questioned, say, "Because I'm your mother." Having felt the weight of "oppression" as a child in a traditionally hierarchical family – I would never inflict that on MY child.

Well folks – I may not have said those exact words –YET – but I HAVE felt the heat of anger rise into my face as my darling child refused to do what I asked him to do.

My Dad reminds me periodically that a family is not a democracy. But I have been subject to hierarchy in any number of ways – and prefer collaboration above all else. And I struggle to maintain my preferred leadership style in the context of a spirited and regularly uncooperative boy-child with whom I live.

I am preparing for a time fast-approaching when he will be a teenager – possessed by demonic hormones – and will need an authoritative parent to regularly reinstate the power of reason in his prefrontal cortex. I'm practicing my role as "one with authority" – and, as it turns out, my parental role models weren't all that bad.

As with my philosophy of parenting, my theology of the divine has followed a similar evolution. In very UCC form, I have preferred to think of G-d as a collaborator and partner. Yes – G-d created the entire universe – me included. But now that I'm here and have free will, of course we are co-workers in repairing the world, creating beauty, tending the garden.

On the other hand, as the demons of greed and self-obsession take the reins of power in our country and around the world, as rampant immaturity, studied ignorance and

constructed alternative realities threaten to destroy our communal fabric and the planet itself –

I am convinced that, even though I have some influence, I am NOT the one in charge. G-d has the ultimate power – has the authorities of natural law and social consequences in a divine arsenal – and, in the end, will be able to silence and exorcise our unclean spirits.

It will definitely bring an end to the careers of many professional interpreters of religious texts, spiritual signs and cultic traditions. It will most likely be painful – as most corporal punishments are. And it may mean the end of humankind as a species. Obedience will be our only option.

G-d will have the last word – just as She/He had the first. “I brought you into this world and I can take you out...”

“Be silent – and come out!”

We mortals do not and will not have a choice about either of those things.
For...

...all our yesterdays have lighted fools. The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player. That struts and frets his hour upon the stage. And then is heard no more: it is a tale. Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.

SCENE V. Dunsinane. Within the castle.
shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.5.5.html

[Silence]

Meanwhile.....G-d is...and will be...still speaking...

Meanwhile.....We mortals yet live...and still speak...

Meanwhile.....We can still choose to collaborate and have influence...
and make a positive difference...one person at a time...

New to her school, and knowing no one, Natalie Hampton started seventh grade expecting to make new friends. She was friendly and made an effort, but as she told [Dr. Pamela Paresky], “everyone already had friends and they weren’t looking for any more.” She knew that sitting alone at lunch would mark her as a social outcast, but when she tried to join other tables, “You can’t sit with us” was the refrain. Before long, Natalie faced persistent exclusion, name-calling, taunting, threats, and “pranks.” With no friends, by 8th grade, she was isolated and lonely. “You’ll never have any friends,” kids taunted her.

The school administration was convinced Natalie was doing something to cause other kids to dislike her and was certain she was exaggerating how she was being treated...The administration's perception of Natalie resulted in adults at the school interpreting everything she did in the least generous way possible. With no support or protection from adults, bullies understood they had tacit approval to target Natalie, and the social aggression became physical...

"When a lot of adults in your life are telling you that it's your fault," she told [Dr. Paresky], "you start to internalize it." She lost hope that her life would get better — that she would even live to graduate high school.

Unkind behavior toward children without social status is rewarded with social capital and elevated social status, because it highlights the status differential...Defending a low-status child is like touching someone with "cooties," so bystanders rarely step in...

This childhood game of social status plays out in adulthood. When Harvey Weinstein had power and status, everyone was "afraid to say anything about him other than 'Thank you, thank you, Harvey,'" says Peter Biskind, who wrote a book about the film industry...

Parents teach this kind of thinking early. They tell children to "walk away" when they see a child being mean to another child. "Don't fight other people's battles," they advise. "Avoid the drama." As a rule, we don't teach children to tend, defend, and befriend those without social status — to spend social capital on them...

After two years of hell at school and four separate physical attacks, Natalie Hampton finally escaped the school where no one defended her. Today, she's a vibrant, happy senior in high school. She has lots of friends, and she looks forward to graduation. Her transformation began on her first day of high school, when, just like before, Natalie didn't know anyone. This time, however, another student, seeing that she looked lost, befriended her. "It saved my life," Natalie reveals in her TEDx Teen talk. All it took was one person. With one friend, she was no longer untouchable...

...After she changed schools, whenever she saw someone eating lunch alone, she would invite them to join her friends at their table. She knew that by saying "sit with us," she protected other children from becoming untouchable. "Each time, the person's face would light up, and the look of relief would wash over [it]," she says. "Some of those people have become some of my closest friends..."

Today, Natalie is famous for having created Sit With Us, the phone-based anti-bullying app that helps kids find a welcoming place to eat in their school cafeteria...When Natalie invited to her lunch table a girl who would later become one of her best friends, she had no way of knowing that until that day, that girl had felt so lonely and hopeless that she had contemplated suicide. Being welcomed into a group of friends saved her life.

All it takes is one person to make a world of difference.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/happiness-and-the-pursuit-leadership/201711/meet-the-teen-who-discovered-the-secret-social>

We are a church. We are a Beloved Community. And we are this way because we choose to follow the example of one person – who invited the untouchables to his table.

“Sit with us” he said.

And here we are.

Scripture Reading for Sunday January 28, 2018 – Epiphany 4 – Year B

Mark 1:21-28

21 They 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.

Humans have been shown to be obedient in the presence of perceived legitimate authority figures, as shown by the **Milgram experiment** in the 1960s, which was carried out by Stanley Milgram to find out how the Nazis managed to get ordinary people to take part in the mass murders of the Holocaust. The experiment showed that obedience to authority was the norm, not the exception. Regarding obedience, Milgram said that "Obedience is as basic an element in the structure of social life as one can point to. Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living, and it is only the man dwelling in isolation who is not forced to respond, through defiance or submission, to the commands of others." A similar conclusion was reached in the Stanford prison experiment.

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