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Title: Let's Talk About...Pizza

Preaching: Danny Gulden, Lead Pastor, Promise Road Campus

Text: [Mark 1:21-28](#)

Email: [Danny Gulden](#)

[Watch Service](#)



If you came to church expecting Pizza, I've got bad news for you. I hope you don't feel like you are in the midst of a bait and switch. Well, to be fair, there are pizza bagel bites, cooked by Bruce Russell, out in the lobby area. We are in a sermon series that we are calling *Let's Talk About...*, talking about some topics that we don't often talk about in church, but probably should. So, today, we are talking about pizza...sort of.

Before I made a career switch and entered seminary, one of the ways that Mary Michael and I were serving in church were as youth sponsors. I gotta tell you, one of the best ways to serve in a church is to be a youth sponsor. When I sensed God calling me to seminary, I was very fortunate that the church where we were members was in search for a youth minister. I was blessed to be called to that position. I knew the youth and knew their families, but I knew I needed to learn more about the why and how of leading a youth ministry program.

One of the prevailing theories at the time, especially in the previous 20 years of youth ministry, was that the key to a thriving youth ministry was pizza. Didn't matter the quality of the pizza or where it was from or any of that, just tell them pizza.

The thought was that in the midst of competing interests for teenagers' attention and affection, if you advertised there would be pizza served at youth groups, the kids would come. It was a shortsighted theory. What was discovered over time was that it greatly shortchanged the spiritual growth of teenagers. Eat some pizza, play some games...that is what adult experts thought teens wanted. But that's not what teens really wanted at all. They could eat pizza. They could play games anywhere.

What they wanted was spiritual growth—a safe place to be themselves, where they didn't have to conform in order to be valued, a place to discover who God created them to be, a place where they could ask difficult questions without fear of judgment. A group where they could make holy friendships.

Those are the things they really wanted and more importantly what the church is uniquely positioned to do in people's lives. We were the place uniquely called to do these things, and what we offered them was the same thing that Domino's offers...pizza.

Nothing against Domino's of course. But God calls us to more.

One of the questions that people ask, some even ask out loud is: Does the Church have a future? We hear or we read about the decline of church attendance, or perhaps we remember the good old days when everyone in town came to church, or we look around at competing interests or the disconnect some believe the church has from daily lives, I'll add, as a pastor and church leader, as we head into an election year that seems like it could be just as divisive as the last two elections we wonder, does the church have a future?

We aren't the first to wonder this. Jesus appears on the scene in Mark's Gospel, and in Mark he really does appear. There is no birth narrative. He's announced. He's baptized. He calls disciples. And then he gets to work.

He and his disciples go to the town of Capernum. He goes into the synagogue on the Sabbath and begins teaching:

The people were amazed by his teaching, for he was teaching them with authority, not like the legal experts. ²³ Suddenly, there in the synagogue, a person with an evil spirit screamed, ²⁴ "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God."

²⁵ "Silence!" Jesus said, speaking harshly to the demon. "Come out of him!" ²⁶ The unclean spirit shook him and screamed, then it came out.

²⁷ Everyone was shaken and questioned among themselves, "What's this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands unclean spirits and they obey him!" ²⁸ Right away the news about him spread throughout the entire region of Galilee. (Mark 1:22-28 CEB)

People were wondering where God was, wondering if God cared, in the midst of most people being oppressed and in the midst of an unstable political environment. So people are wondering, in some way, about church.

Something to notice from this ancient story that speaks to us today is that in the synagogue, in a holy place, Jesus does something that no one has ever seen before. With people being described as shaken and questioning, this cleansing of an unclean spirit in a religious space on the sabbath is new territory.

It is a new teaching from a new kind of authority. It's God doing something new

I grew up as a kid primarily in the late 70s and early 80s. My parents took me to church, and we went to church with my grandparents. For most people of my generation and generations before and perhaps even for some people younger than me, we largely inherited our faith from our parents, who had largely inherited their faith from their parents. Don't get me wrong, it is important to teach the next generation the faith and to model what a life of faith looks like.

The main reason we inherited this faith was access to information. Back in my day, if you wanted to research something, you had to own an encyclopedia or go to the school library or public library and look it up in the encyclopedia. Things are different now. Years ago in church, the preacher could say something, and it was thought that someone with theological training was the only person with access. Now, you have access to most everything, if not everything, that I have access to.

Some have said that we are in a digital babylon. Digital Babylon refers to Daniel in the Hebrew scriptures. He goes from the Hebrew community to Babolyn, a power of the day. He has greater access to information, a wider range of authority. He assimilates into the community. He gets a new name. He becomes the third highest ranking official. You would not have recognized him as a Hebrew person except for his prayer life.

Like Daniel, our menu for creating our beliefs, our values, our ethics in some way knows no bounds because of the information available to us.

It's in this environment in which the church has to discern its future. It is here in which God is doing something new. Because people's curiosity is up, people's search for meaning is greater than ever. According to the Barna group, 84 percent of Americans are currently open to spirituality. Twenty-five percent of Americans are in some phase of deconstruction. And what is interesting to me, maybe only me, but sales of Bibles in the United States is up 27% in the last year.

A quick word about the term deconstruction: Deconstruction is a term that ministry-types use a good bit. Essentially, deconstruction, when talked about in religious terms, means one is wrestling with and moving away from bad theology, bad teaching, and bad church experiences they had when they were younger. They believe there is a God, they believe in Jesus Christ, yet they don't necessarily accept all they were taught when they were younger. It's as I say often, don't let your kids learn things in church they are going to have to unlearn later on. People, who by many accounts, could have given up on faith, are revisiting, working toward a new faith based in a new kind of authority.

Maybe you are doing some of this yourself or have done some of this without even realizing it. “Deconstructing isn’t a threat to God. God honors the doubters, the wrestles, the honest,” says Larissa Lee.

All of this tells us that people are spiritually hungry. Maybe even hungry for more than the Church has been willing to offer in the past. I believe that the Geist Christian Church is well-positioned to walk alongside people in all stages of the faith journey, to walk alongside you.

People are spiritually hungry. *We* are spiritually hungry. The way of Jesus is powerful, life-changing stuff. Perhaps, as we ask about the future of church, that future of faith. We are like that crowd in the synagogue, shaken a bit thinking about it, but amazed at what God through Jesus Christ is doing. Maybe it’s something we haven’t seen yet. Rest assured, the church has a future.

Get ready to be amazed at what God will do in your life in this place through Jesus Christ.

Amen.