

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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“Astounded”

Mark 1:21-28 (NRSV)

[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.

TEACHING WITH AUTHORITY

Who is your favorite teacher?

I can remember mine. He was a professor of psychology at Baylor University, Dr. Leslie Moser.

Dr. Moser was not the best at lectures. In fact he spoke in a soft voice and more than one person nodded off in his class. He was an older man who was somewhat hard of hearing and sometimes he had a hard time finding the right words.

But, he was also one of the best counselors I have ever known.

There was something about his demeanor that set him apart from the other teachers. He was such a warm, accepting person; he demonstrated what it meant to have what the therapist Carl Rogers called “unconditional positive regard.”

I can honestly say that most of what I know about counseling came from taking his classes, coming to him for personal help, and watching him work with other people. When it came to counseling he not only talked the talk; he also walked the walk.

His presence was a powerful example. In that regard, I would say that he taught with authority.

According to our Scripture for today, Jesus also taught with authority. It was his presence made a difference. This is the primary message of Mark's gospel.

Mark focuses almost entirely on Jesus and rarely on us. If you want a sermon that tells you where you've gone wrong and what you need to do to fix it, then the gospel of Mark is not the place to turn.

Notice that in our passage for today Mark doesn't even tell us what Jesus taught. He just tells us *how* he taught. Jesus taught as one who had authority and the people were astounded. This was totally unlike the teaching of the Scribes.

Don't misunderstand. The Scribes were great teachers. It was their job to painstakingly write new copies of Scripture. They knew everything there was to know about God's word.

But, Jesus was in a league all his own. The Scribes informed people. Jesus left people astounded. No religious leader before or since has taught like Jesus.

I love it when people get something out of my sermons. But, I have never been able to preach or teach like Jesus. I may have informed people. I may have on occasion even inspired people.

But, I have never left anyone astounded.

For that you'll have to see Jesus. Astonishment is above my pay grade. I don't have that kind of authority. If we want to really change we have to take the focus off of us and put it squarely on Jesus.

That's what happens in our lesson for today. The attention is squarely on Jesus. They are astonished at his teaching.

THE INTERRUPTION

And then the sermon is rudely interrupted. A man with an "unclean spirit" begins to act up. He shouts, "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."

Can you imagine what a disruption this would be in the middle of a sermon? If that ever happened to me I doubt that anyone could concentrate on anything else the rest of the

morning. Oh, we would make the best of it. Perhaps some of our ushers would usher the unruly guest off the premises.

But, that would be one ruined sermon.

It didn't happen that way with Jesus. Jesus uses this interruption to deepen their understanding of who he was and what he had come to do. He responded to the challenge of the demon with a command, "Shut up and get out."

It didn't come easy, but it happened. With a screaming convulsion reminiscent of the movie *The Exorcist*, the demon came out of the man.

One thing is clear throughout the whole New Testament. The astounding teaching of Jesus immediately creates conflict. Jesus is in conflict with the religious and political leaders.

And in this case Jesus is also in conflict with dark and fearful powers.

Jesus is not only teaching people about the kingdom of God; he is bringing in the kingdom by making war on those demonic powers that contest God's power.

DEMON POSSESSION

Whenever I teach on this passage I know what people are going to ask, "Pastor, do you think this man was really a victim of demon possession or do you think he was mentally ill? Do we Presbyterians even believe in demon possession?"

And no matter what answer I give; I know that the discussion will bog down at this point.

Some people will argue forcefully that this talk about demon possession is a first century world view that has been replaced by a more sophisticated understanding of mental health.

Others will be very suspicious of this interpretation and suggest that we ignore the reality of evil at our peril.

But, our discussion misses the point of the passage. This passage is not about us and what we believe or don't believe about unclean spirits. This passage is about the power and promise of Jesus.

We don't need to psychoanalyze or exorcise this man from a distance. What we need to do is recognize that this was yet another example of the unique power and promise of Jesus. Whatever the problem, whatever the evil, it was no match for the authority of Jesus. He had come to restore the hope of those whose lives had been invaded by evil.

If you don't believe in the existence of evil you haven't been reading the newspaper. And as Fred Craddock wryly puts it "not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in our world."

I like what one minister friend said about this,

"If we don't teach our students the difference between good and evil then all we're doing is creating clever devils."

We think that we are so sophisticated when it comes to our view of the world, but there is so much that is beyond our control.

The question is not, "Is there any such thing as demon possession?" The question is this,

"What kind of demon controls us?"

What are those spirits that act like gods in our world?"

DEMON POSSESSION AND US

Once again how we interpret a passage of Scripture depends upon whom we identify with in the story. Some of us may identify with the crowds who were amazed at Jesus' teaching. Some of us may even identify with Jesus.

But, I, perhaps much to your surprise, suggest we identify with the man who is possessed by an unclean spirit. I suggest that we identify with the man who cries out in the middle of the service,

"What have you to do with us Jesus? Why are you bothering me? Why are you upsetting my world?"

This past Friday I took some continuing education. We studied the works of a rabbi and therapist by the name of Edwin Friedman. Friedman often worked with Christian ministers to help them understand how to lead in congregations that were emotionally troubled.

One of the techniques he used to help a congregation like this was to challenge their irrational assumptions in a rather playful way. You do this while staying calm and connected to the people personally. As you can imagine this takes courage and a strong sense of self.

But, Friedman often found that Christian ministers did not possess these characteristics. They were as he put it, "wimps." In fact sometimes the ministers would challenge Friedman suggesting that such confrontation would be unchristian.

Friedman with a twinkle in his eye said that as a Jew he certainly wasn't an expert in the New Testament, but it seemed to him that more than half of the stories about Jesus told of a man who challenged the people and systems that were dysfunctional.

Jesus didn't avoid conflict. In fact Jesus often created conflict.

I think that in some ways the rabbi had a better understanding of what it meant to be Christian than some Christians! The Bible tells us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

To put it another way, we're not the people we should be or want to be. We are often controlled by things that are not important or even destructive. And that needs to be challenged.

All of us need someone who can command the evil that is in us to leave. And there is only one who is up to that task. Only one has that kind of astounding authority. His name is Jesus.

THE STRUGGLE

Jesus not only comes to comfort the afflicted. Jesus also comes to afflict the comfortable!

When Jesus comes into our life the immediate response is not always joy, peace and eternal bliss. When Jesus comes into our life there is conflict and disturbance. The old way of life is being challenged. The demons that control us are being told to leave, and we don't like that.

Like the demoniac in our passage for today spiritual growth can be a time of great stress. The demons do not come out of us easily. The ancients called it the "long dark night of the soul." There is a great convulsing, a great struggle when Jesus comes into our world. We cling tenaciously to the old destructive ways.

Let's face it. Some of us love our demons and when Jesus orders them out we cry with a loud voice, "Why are you doing this Jesus? Why are you disturbing my neat and ordered life?"

The demon called Jesus "the Holy One of God." When the holy comes into our life, it means that we are being touched by something that is what the theologians call "wholly other."

When Jesus comes into our life we are being touched by One who is above and beyond us. As John the Baptist put it Jesus baptized with "fire."

Fire burns up the old life so that something new can be born.

NAMING THE DEMON

When I work with people or congregations that are troubled, I don't see it as my job to calm things down or manage the conflict. We often talk approvingly about people who pour oil on troubled waters. I think that's a terrible idea because there's always someone who is willing to light a match!

My job is to name the demon. My job is to frankly describe what is going on and ask others to do the same thing. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32) The strength of the demon is the veil of secrecy. The healing power of Jesus is delivered when the demon is named and called out.

Now this scares people. We have been taught from a very early age to hide the demons that trouble us. But, what are we saying when we do that? We are saying that the demons are stronger than our Savior.

Today's lesson teaches us the opposite. Our Savior is stronger than the demons that possess us. Our Savior is greater than our fears. Our Savior is even greater than death.

Even our greatest fear, body broken and blood shed was not too great an obstacle for Jesus. In his hands our greatest fear became an eternal source of hope, a sacrament of salvation.

THE CRAZIES AMONG US

Some people lament the fact that many in the church say that they want to follow Jesus and yet they act in such crazy foolish ways.

Let me give you some straight talk on this.

The church is full of demon possessed, crazy people who know the name of Christ but don't want to follow him. There are angry, lonely, imbalanced, (and some would even say possessed) people who flock to every church.

(We shouldn't be surprised by this. They flocked to Jesus as well.)

Churches try to deal with this in many ways. Sometimes we try to work around them, but they are always messing things up ... interrupting our agenda and preventing us from doing everything decently and in order.

At times the crazy ones seem to take over. We say that the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" and in some churches the agenda is set by those who have the greatest needs.

In this case the church becomes as crazy or possessed as the people we are trying to accommodate. The church will certainly fail in its mission if we allow ourselves to be taken over by those who fret and worry with the loudest voice.

So what's a church to do? Ignoring doesn't work. And we certainly don't want to let craziness take over. What do we do with those people who are always interrupting and taking over things?

A LESSON FOR ALL

Jesus saw this crazy interruption as an opportunity to teach with authority. Jesus saw this disturbance as an opportunity to change not only the one that was troubled but also teach everyone else a profound lesson about the kingdom of God.

When I took my first class in abnormal psychology the professor warned us that we would recognize ourselves in many of the descriptions of people who were mentally unbalanced. He said that when it came to mental health it wasn't a matter of kind but a matter of degree.

All of us have our own kind of craziness and demon possession.

The demon possessed among us offers us an opportunity to confront and name our own demons. Sometimes the reason we are so ineffective in dealing with the crazies in the church is that we have not dealt with our own craziness and spiritual immaturity.

Let's face it. We can't fix those other people who act in such strange ways. We don't have that kind of power.

But, there is one thing that we can do. We can come to Jesus. We can see our own life in the bright light of his life and teachings. And that can change us in some rather amazing ways.

When we take our craziness to Jesus, we take it to one who teaches with authority. He not only tells us what to do; he helps us do it.

And guess what? Those crazy people, those demon possessed people who gave us such a hard time; they start to get "better" as well.

And like those crowds of old we will learn that this is a different kind of teacher. His power and authority are unmatched. He is truly astounding.

Amen.