

Mark 1:21-28

1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

1:22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

1:23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

1:24 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."

1:25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

1:26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

1:27 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."

1:28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Proclamation of the Word

It was a regular Sabbath service at the synagogue or like a normal Sunday morning worship service. The member walked in, sat in his usual pew. Everyone in Capernaum knew where each of the regulars sat. He blended into the crowd, nothing unusual about that day.

Another man walked into the synagogue that day. He was from out of town. He came in trying to find a seat. He brought in a couple of friends who seemed to have just gotten in from fishing. The regulars were milling around visiting with each other. "How were sales this week? How is your father getting along? How 'bout them Tigers?" they would say.

Then the lights went down and a piano began to play. A hush and calm fell over the congregation. When the Scripture was read, the stranger stepped up and began to speak. He must be a rabbi, a teaching elder, or else he would not stand and speak. It was Jesus, the Nazarene.

He begins to speak a word. Expectant worshipers are engaged thinking, "He really is speaking to me." "Well, isn't this fantastic." Whatever Jesus said, Mark writes, "and they were astounded by his teaching." He wasn't just lecturing them like the scribes did, this connected with their heart. There was something different about this guy.

Then Jesus zoned in on that one man for some reason. He was seated on the middle pew, just behind the lady with that great hat on. Over the years- we hearers of this story- imagine a man with an unclean spirit to look like a scene from the *Exorcist*, all Linda Blair with her head spinning in a 360 and pea soup spewing out of her mouth. But that is not what happened. There was nothing unusual about him or else he could not have slipped in past the ushers. He dressed like everyone else, looked like he had just come from the office. He was just a man, in the church, with an unclean spirit.

When Jesus gazed right into his eyes, the spirits said, "What do you have to do with us?"

What does the Lord of all creation have to do with us? our longings, our inner wrestlings, our struggling and pain?

What does the Lord of all creation have to do with us?

Everything.

Unclean spirits which have a hold on the man can have a hold on us. Our hidden shame, our secret fears, our anxieties that hold us captive.

Unclean spirits can be our -isms. Our sexism, our racism, our terrorism, our moralism.

Unclean spirits can be our phobias- our claustrophobia, our fear of intimacy, our fear of failure.

Whatever it is that binds us and holds us captive, choking the fullness of life out of us.

Jesus speaks with authority unlike the Scribes who argue over the Bible, debating the text. Anyone can use Scripture, but only God can speak through it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. He is the living Word. He knows this man and names his demons. He can honestly see the man's struggle and names them for what they are- unclean spirits that are choking out his life. Jesus is the truth can set us free. The first step to freedom is telling the truth.

Jesus names the things that we usually don't want to talk about in church. Much of the time, the Alcoholics Anonymous group meeting several times a week, does a better job of this: naming failings, admitting we are powerless over such things, and knowing that we can only overcome with God's help.

I bet the man came to worship just as we come, hoping to hear God speak a Word to us. We hope God will bring us some freedom from the things we wrestle with. But we must become vulnerable before God, honest about our shame, for that is the source of courage and change.

This man had been carrying burdens, perhaps so comfortable with them that he could not even recognize them himself, but Jesus did. He seemed like an average worshipper. He could have looked like the 3rd grade boy with his pants tucked in his cowboy boots, or the mother snuggling her newborn, or the cock-sure college student, or the senior wondering what she is going to do next, or the older person trying to decide whether to sell the house and move into a retirement community. The man is one of us.

When Jesus confronts the unclean spirits, picking a fight, they yell out, "What do you want with us?" The man thought he had managed to control them, keep them hidden. But now, like a bruise that

someone pokes, they are angry. The man thought he had worked through that pain, put it behind him, and covered it up with his Sunday best, especially at church.

But Jesus will not let it be. He picks a fight with the spirits for he knows that it is the only way the man might find healing, wholeness, and peace. He knows this man, as he knows and loves each person made in the image of God. He sees the man and he sees his cage, the prison in which he lives.

The gospel of Mark shows us that after Jesus is baptized the heavens are ripped open. This Jesus is one who rips open, break boundaries, and sets people free. The very first act of ministry, after Jesus calls a few disciples, is this one- casting out demons. And as we will see as we read through Mark in worship in the coming we year, Jesus keeps setting people free- healing, teaching, casting out unclean spirits.

You see, Jesus sees the man and sees our shame, our vulnerabilities as well. He can scan a crowd and know who has been co-opted by fear, anxiety, hate. And Jesus picks a fight with these powers because they destroy life, not just for the one possessed by them, but by their behaviors and consequences.

Addiction can lead otherwise rational, good people to find comfort in unhealthy substance that becomes a cage for their soulsⁱ.

Racism can lead otherwise rational, loving people, to be blind to injustice.

Insecurity can lead otherwise rational people to greed or violence or risky behavior.

Homophobia can lead otherwise rational, loving people, to force others to live in a closet.

Jesus knows this. He confronts the unclean spirits. No wonder they convulse and fight back. They are comfortable residing there in this man's soul. The man will likely not know how to act once he has been set free for he only knows the familiarity of his demons. He has befriended them. He doesn't see how they have co-opted his life.

Jesus knows that the man is not his demons. Jesus sees and loves the person fully and wholeheartedly. So he speaks directly to the spirits to get out! When Jesus speaks something powerful happens.

One day Pope John XXIII was having an audience with a group of people, one of whom was the mother of several children. At one point the pope said to this woman, "Would you please tell me the names of your children. I realize that anyone in this room could tell me their names, but something very special happens when a mother speaks the names of her own children."

I suspect we know what the pope meant. And maybe it was something like this that the people sensed about Jesus. Maybe this is what they meant when they said he had an authority others seemed to lack. The teachers of the law were good at teaching about God. They drew off their book learning and seminary training, they employed their various gifts of oratory and enunciation. And good though they were at this, there always seemed to be a bit of a remove between a given scribe

and the God he was talking about. But not so with Jesus. There was an intimacy to his knowledge about God. He spoke as though he had spent a long time personally being with God. Oddly enough, it almost seemed at times like he was speaking as God. Probably no one in Capernaum that day went quite so far as to conclude this was God in the flesh, but when this Jesus fellow talked about God, it was like hearing a mother intone the names of her own children—the love and the personal involvement Jesus had with his subject matter made it clear that this was not coming out of his head so much as his heart. ⁱⁱ-

We are a church of the broken. We are a fellowship of the needy. And the good news is that Jesus comes among us as one with authority. He meets us in our brokenness and offers himself to us. He asks us to trust him, even though having our demons cast out might hurt at first. He knows that in order for healing and fullness of life, we must be vulnerable and honest before him.

He comes to us in these signs of broken bread and cup poured out. He shows us that it is in brokenness that we can begin healing. It is by pouring out our life, that we are filled up and made whole.

Jesus confronts the spirits saying, "You can go now. He doesn't need you anymore. I am the one who truly loves him and created him. He can trust me. So scat! Go! Be gone! I am here, and I will be with him always."

He calls us to also look at the places of brokenness and need in our world, and ask how is God calling us to share our life, our substance, ourselves so that others of God's children might know restoration and peace. It starts with naming the unclean spirits.

This is the Lord's work. It is also our work as those who follow him.

What does Jesus have to do with us?

Everything.

ⁱ See article, "The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered, and It's Not What You Think" (Johann Hari, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-real-cause-of-addicti_b_6506936.html), which separated persons with addiction from their addictions. The article discusses that when persons have other options they will choose well-being.

ⁱⁱIllustration found at <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu> for the lectionary text.