

What Does Jesus Have to Do with Us?

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Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

Psalm 111

111:1 Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

111:2 Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.

111:3 Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.

111:4 He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful.

111:5 He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.

111:6 He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.

111:7 The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

111:8 They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

111:9 He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name.

111:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

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, 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 asked.

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, they thought.

It was Jesus, the Nazarene. He speaks. 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 360 degrees 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 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, our 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 terrorism, our moralism, our racism.

Unclean spirits can be our phobias- our fear of strangers, 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, like professors debating the text. Anyone can use Scripture, but only God can speak through it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is THE authority.

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 that 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 even though we are taught to tell the truth. 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 with which we wrestle. 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 college 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, breaks boundaries, and sets people free. The very first act of ministry, after Jesus calls a few disciples, is this one- casting unclean spirits. 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 souls¹.

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.

Violence and availability of guns can lead to deaths like those this week of KY High School students Bailey Holt and Preston Cope. When you register your child for kindergarten, middle and high school, or college, we parents should not be afraid they are sending their children into a war zone, but that is

our current situation. I am a spouse of a teacher, a mother of school age children. I pray every day for safety in schools because there is no will to change the situation.

Jesus knows us. 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.

BUT 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, "Get out!" When Jesus speaks something powerful happens.

Telling the truth and naming the demons is powerful.

Jamie Tworkowski, founder of To Write Love on Her Arms, a non-profit which helps people, particularly young people, struggling with depression, addiction, self-harm, and suicide. A friend shared his book with me. In it Jamie writes about Elephants in the room and the effects of not dealing with them. In this instance, he and his dad have been at odds.

He writes, "Dad asked how I was doing, he asked about TWLOHA, and then he asked about the elephant...are we ok, you and I? The truth is I didn't know what to say...The truth is that this conversation was weeks overdue....years overdue. So I closed my computer and we talked. We talked about the distance. We talked about the way things have changed over the last couple of years. We talked about depression and money and love and home. We talked about pain. We talked about the way things used to be and why things are the way they are. We talked about the things I talked about in counseling last year. We talked about the things that feel broken inside of us. We talked about the ways we feel alone..."

He continues, "Basically we agreed that the things we were saying were big and would take time... it's a process. We didn't have every answer. We could fix each other...But we agreed we were back on the right track. Talking, being honest, saying it mattered, saying it was all worth fighting for. Trying to communicate. We agreed that the goal was to be healthy and to love one another. I can't fix him and he can't fix me, but we have a lot of control over how we treat each other, how we talk to each other, how we make time for each other."ⁱⁱ

Love is a thousand things, but at the center it is a choice. It is a choice to love people."

We can be Christ to one another. Telling the truth in love. Being one another's priests who experience the cleansing grace of God's forgiving love through one another.

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 unclean spirits 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 and one another.

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 in love, that we are filled up and made whole. Jesus says the more love you give away, the more you are.

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."

Jesus 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 God's children might know restoration and peace. It starts with naming the unclean spirits.

This is the Lord's work. For those of us who follow him, it is also our work.

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, 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.

ⁱⁱ Tworowski, Jamie. *If You Feel Too Much; Thoughts on Things Found and Lost and Hoped For* (NewYork: Tarcher/Penguin 2015) 31-32.