

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 31, 2021

Mark 1:21-28

The author of Mark is a storyteller. And what a story he tells, one that draws us in and places us in the story. The question is, from who's perspective do you see our reading today?

Jesus, fresh off calling his first disciples, comes into the synagogue in Capernaum. A town of 1500 with fishing as the main industry that will become the base of his ministry in Galilee. A place where there would have been some trade and commerce. A town with a purpose-built synagogue, not just an unused home.

Jesus enters that synagogue and begins to teach during the service. This would not have been unusual, to invite a visiting rabbi/teacher to speak in the synagogue. What was unusual was how he taught. He's not quoting the interpretation of other rabbis, "Hillel the Elder says..". No, he spoke and interpreted speaking on his own authority. "I say that it means..."

The scribes, the local learned men who would normally be teaching, will take offense at this. Think that Jesus is stepping into the realm only God can occupy. Not willing or able to see that this one IS the Son of God. Not able to hear the truth in his proclamation because it goes against much that they have received and understood as "Truth". Unable to believe God might do a new thing. So, they will reject God in Christ.

The crowd gathered in the synagogue are thunderstruck at how Jesus was teaching, amazed at what his actions towards the man with the unclean spirit

mean. Both thrilled and terrified, drawn by the spectacle more than the message, “Look what this man can do! Did you see that!?”

Finally, the man with the unclean spirit. Someone ritually unclean should not have been there in the first place. He would have been excluded because to have come into that synagogue would have made the others present unclean as well. Interfered with their ability to live out their part of the covenant with God. Just by being present he endangered that relationship for them.

Yet, he has gotten in, and he speaks. Or rather the unclean spirit speaks for him. Fearful of Jesus and what he means for the spirit. Trying to gain the upper hand by naming Jesus, “I know who you are the Holy One of God.” The ancient world knew the power of naming something. When you name it, you have power over it. This is why you have ancient stories of the hero keeping their real name hidden from others. This is also why the first step to recovery for an addict, is to name their addiction.

But Jesus just shrugs off that attempt and then Jesus speaks. Speaks a word that muzzles the spirit and then another word that casts it out. “Zip it and come out of him!” This casting out is violent. It convulses the man throwing him into spasms and it is with a loud cry that it comes out of him. And then the story moves on... but I wonder about that man.

What became of him? Once he performs the rituals to become clean again, was he accepted by the scribes who were offended by Jesus? Was he welcomed back into fellowship by the crowd once they were done with their obsession with Jesus and the spectacle of his powers? Was he one of the ones crowded around the

door of Simon's house later that evening? Did he follow Jesus as a disciple? Or, now freed from the unclean spirit, did he live out his life quietly in Capernaum?

I have been teaching a class for the University of Dubuque LIFE program here in Cedar Rapids again. It is a privilege and a pleasure to do so and I am grateful the congregation has allowed me to do this. It is helpful for me to interact with folks who are not always connected with a church or even the Christian faith. In our conversation this week, we talked about experiences some of them had with the Christian church. Ones that made them believe that sinners, the unclean of our day, had no place in the church. They spoke of judgement from other believers, of rejection because of divorce, addiction, suicide. They told of the assumption that you had to be righteous to be a Christian.

It made me think of this story from our gospel. Of the man with the unclean spirit, who should not have been there in the synagogue, but was. It made me think about Jesus, in the next chapter, speaking to the Pharisees and telling them that those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick... That Jesus has come to call not the righteous, but sinners. The clear implication here is that all of them are sick, the Pharisees and scribes as well as the tax collectors and those labeled as "sinners". All of them have need of a physician, but some of them are in denial. They deceive themselves and the truth is not in them.

The reality is that we all are the one with the unclean spirit. Possessed by things that are threatened by the presence of God in Christ. Possessed by things that are contrary to or less than God's intent for us. Things like the need to be in control. A fear of looking foolish, of bucking the crowd. A need to be busy so that

we might be deemed valuable. The need to be better than someone else, to be superior to them, lord it over them. The old grudges we tuck away in the dark recesses of our soul and pull out later with our “whatabout’s” and wield them to destroy others. Gleeful at their comeuppance.

We are all messed up and messy people. Imperfect, at best. Falling short not only of the glory of God but even the barest expectation of God.

And this is the place for you. Here in these walls, within the bounds of this online worship. This is the place for you because here you will encounter Jesus. The one whose Word will silence those spirits that dwell within and who will cast them out by the power of his Word.

This is not an easy thing, to be rid of these unclean spirits that possess us. As they go, they will convulse our lives. They will leave kicking and screaming. It will be hard on us.

I have performed the Gospel of Mark almost annually over the last 24 years of ministry. I have always imagined this moment as one where convulsions drop the man to the ground and then the spirit is regurgitated out. A literal vomiting out of what has dis-eased the man. I don’t know about you, but I HATE to get sick to my stomach. But, as vile and physically punishing as that process is, how much better do we often feel when it has happened? When we have been purged of the very thing that was sickening us.

The gospel that Jesus comes to share is not just about words spoken, intellectual assent given. The gospel does something to people. It creates the reality it proclaims. It lays hold of us and transforms us into something closer to the image

of God that resides in us. That Jesus sees in us, just as he sees past the unclean spirit and looked in the eyes of the man beneath... and freed him.

Jesus does this not to brag or boast. Not to improve his ratings or his following. To bask in the glow of the adoring and amazed crowd. He does this out of pure love for all of us, those who are in need. Because we all are bound by sin, by these unclean spirits. Jesus does this for the ones who can see it, and the ones who cannot, like the scribes and the Pharisees.

Let me be clear. There is no perfection here at St. John, my friends in Christ. We are all sinners, those with unclean spirits who have come into this place knowing that Jesus is our only hope. Knowing that only his Word has the power to release us from those things that imprison us. Knowing it won't be easy, but also knowing that we are surrounded by others who have already experienced that convulsive cleansing of Christ. Who will, metaphorically hold our hair, while the power of that Word expels those things that dis-ease us.

And unlike the story in our gospel today, I know what happens to those who are healed. Some follow close behind Jesus as his disciples. People like Nadia Bolz-Weber and Dave Raemisch who have been grabbed and transformed by that grace and now are pastors of Christ's church. Some will act like the four who bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus. Going out into the world and bringing others into the presence of Christ so that they might be healed as well. Some stay closer to home; welcoming people into worship and the encounter with the Word, feeding them coffee and treats, sharing their story. Some will live out a quiet life of faith, present, helpful, always there but never in front. And all of them willing to come alongside another who is experiencing the impact when Jesus says to

those voices that speak for us, that beat us down, tell us we aren't good enough, that we aren't doing enough, that we are better than others, "Be quiet and come out of her!" "Zip it and come out of him!"

This is the place for you, if you are imperfect, sin filled, bound by outside forces. Because it is here that Jesus will look into your eyes and see the true you. The one created in God's own image. And that same Jesus will free you from all that binds you. It happens in the waters of baptism and the Meal we share. It happens through his Word, read, spoken, proclaimed.

So, come my friends and be part of the story. Come and feast with us each week on the word of Christ. Experience again the power of that word. Look into the eyes of Jesus who loves you beyond all measure and be freed from all that binds you. May it be so. Amen.