

## A New Teaching

*Mark 1: 21-28*

<sup>21</sup> They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup> 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.” <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup> 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.” <sup>28</sup> At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

When I was in seminary, I spent a semester as a chaplain at the downtown hospital. Often, I would get calls to meet with someone on the fifth floor who wanted to discuss spiritual matters. The fifth floor was designated as the psych unit. In the halls you could often hear the moans and groans of patients in their rooms. Every once in a while, I would be in the company of someone who heard voices and would shout at them to “be silent” and leave them alone. It may seem similar to our story where Jesus’ first ministerial act was to cast out an “unclean spirit.” The gospel does not sugarcoat ministry. You might imagine: people go to church expecting to hear Jesus preach, and what breaks out is a shouting match between Jesus and this person who seems out of control. The man is shouting. He’s convulsing on the floor. Nobody knows what to do. Except Jesus, his first teaching, is to expel the unclean spirit. If this is the first thing Jesus does in this gospel, what is the teaching for us?

As we begin, we need to own that these texts perplex us. It says the man has an “unclean spirit” but we don’t quite know what it means. Over the years, as modern medicine has developed we’ve slapped psychological labels on the stories to explain them. We’ve said it could be mental health issues, or PTSD, or epilepsy. And in the process of trying to wrap our minds around what Jesus is doing, we have demonized the people who suffer with these issues. There are even commentators who say the ancient writers didn’t have language to string together the things we know now. So we look at the symptoms and we diagnose, and then we put an “unclean spirit” label on it. But we also know what damage is done when we place a stigma on people. So at the outset, we need to acknowledge that we simply don’t know what “unclean spirit” means.

But wonder if it’s the point: if this is the first thing Jesus does, perhaps it’s language used to describe something that can happen to all of us? What if an “unclean spirit” is simply a moment when something moves into our life that begins to consume us and takes up too much room? It begins to control our emotions. Dictates our behaviors. That there is something else other than our cognitive logic that can dictate how we function in the world. After all, in the bible to be possessed means to be consumed by an emotion. Go back to the garden and Adam and Eve are consumed with desire. Their oldest son, Cain, becomes consumed with envy. If that’s true, it might also include how cravings or addictions can take over a person’s life. Drive a few miles

down route 421 and there is an opioid epidemic engulfing rural communities. Families are destroyed, jobs are lost, life is stolen. Maybe, if we generalize, it forces us to look at what we crave under stress and what we run to when we are feeling blue? Is it the fridge? Do we do some online shopping? What consumes us that dictates our behaviors?

If I gaze into my own soul, I watched how over the last few years, I struggled with having an emotional reaction to the news. Of course, most of it was justified in my mind. But I could feel something unhealthy rising up inside of me. And it wasn't until I was working on this passage I could name that there were moments when I absorbed and was overwhelmed by the unclean spirit of contempt. And it blinded me from seeing God's image in others. Of course, food, or shopping, or getting angry at injustice is a good thing, but when it consumes us and controls us, that is a different story. And what might been a helpful servant became a harmful master. So what if an "unclean spirit" is a loose term for a force that can enter into all of us? When something moves into our lives that consumes us.

Whatever we land on, here's the good news: The point the writer is trying to make is that whatever this unclean spirit is, Jesus has authority over it. His presence makes a difference. Funny, how we don't ever hear Jesus' lesson plan. We don't get a peek at his lecture notes. The writer wants us to see: Jesus has power over that which disrupts us from rightful relationship with God and others. That there are voices in the world which keep us in stray jackets, and thwart justice. Jesus' desire is to silence them and release us from their grip and return us to ourselves. And just to be clear: the unclean spirit is the first to name who Jesus is as well as the first one to resist him. Because Jesus is our example of how God's power is used in this world. His presence is a threat to what drives us toward unchecked consumption. His presence is a threat to forces which desire to segregate and separate. Jesus' presence is a threat to the voices which remind us of our worst moments and regrets and that which chips away to us until we believe we are not worthy or precious or loved. His presence is a threat to the demonic powers which demonize others, both personally and communally.

So perhaps we imagine Jesus in the shouting match with this man.

The man shouts at Jesus, "Have you come to destroy us?"

And Jesus responds, "I have come to make you whole."

And the man shouts, "Well, I know who you are!"

And Jesus shouts back, "Yes, I am the one who loves you!"

"No, I am not desirable! I am not lovable! I am not enough!"

And Jesus says, "Be silent and come out of him! Because you are desirable! You are lovable! You are enough! You are beloved!"

And those of us who are watching this scene unfold. We suddenly find ourselves on the inside of God's Spirit, invited to look at our own stories and lives. At the wounds and voices which tell us untruths about who we are. Then, we wonder: what is this new teaching Jesus is offering us? Eventually, we come to realize it is the power of God's unbreakable love whose deepest purpose and longing is to return us to ourselves. Now, how much different would our world look if that was a lesson each one of us could learn?

Let's pray: Be close to us, O Christ, and silence the voices that would call into question your love for us. Restore in us your peace. And if we've listened to the voices which condemn us or

consume us, muzzle them now, so we can hear you calling us beloved more clearly. We pray by the authority and power of your presence in our lives and in our world. Amen.