

The First Teaching

Mark 1: 14, 21-28

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God...[Then] they went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 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." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Remember your first ministry experience? Maybe a mission trip? Perhaps an encounter with someone you normally wouldn't encounter. In a few weeks our confirmation kids will be in for an eye-opening weekend. On Saturday, March 2, they are experiencing our city led by a homeless person. Navigate the streets. Learn where the homeless eat and sleep. On Sunday, they will be at The Dwelling with the homeless folks to serve a meal to 200 people afterwards. For some it will be their first time experiencing anything like it. After Jesus comes out preaching the good news of God's kingdom he has is an encounter with a man who has an "unclean spirit." So Jesus casts out the bugger. It just so happens to be a first thing Jesus does in his ministry and the first "teaching" his disciples experience. So what do we do with the man with "unclean spirit" story?

At the outset, we have to admit the text perplexes us. Historically, conservative scholars have turned it into a spiritual warfare lesson; while progressive types have tried to diagnose the man by saying the man must've had mental health issues, or PTSD, or even epilepsy. And, as a result of labeling the man this way, have tragically demonized others who struggle with mental health or PTSD or epilepsy. I've sat with some who, as a result of hearing this interpretation in their churches, have stopped taking their meds in lieu of believing Jesus would heal them, only to fall into the same cycle. Which is exactly why we can't read these stories literally, because imposing a modern diagnosis on an ancient text only piles on the societal prejudices for people with disabilities or health issues of all kinds. So first things first: in the mystery of this story it has been interpreted in a hurtful way rather than a healing one.

So perhaps we peer underneath the surface if we are to find the deeper meaning of what is happening here. You see, in the Greek it does not say the man *has an unclean spirit*. It says, "there was a man *in* an unclean spirit." There are forces surrounding him—an environment which consumes him—and as a result robs him of his humanity. Are we not all subjects of an unhealthy environment these days? Watch the news all day and we will begin to mimic whatever news we listen to. I mean, how many people do we run into who can't even cope with this being an election year? It can be consuming! \ Or after another mass shooting we hear it's about mental health or gun laws. But have they not also become a scapegoat for the normalized violence of our

society? And did you happen to notice where the man with the unclean spirit is in the story? He's in the church! Not always the healthiest of environments for us to be in either!

So what if the man, rather than being able to defend himself from society's ills, he has internalized them becoming stuck *in* an unclean system which projects onto him all which they are not willing to see within themselves. After all, are we not all inside of an unhealthy environment in one way or another? Most of us are simply privileged enough to have the resources and support to navigate these systems in ways which don't consume us and rob us of life. But the man, like so many others, does not.

Now what does Jesus do? He sends the unclean spirit packing.
Jesus casts out the voices which tell him he is not worthy to belong.
He casts out the entity that tells him he is not valued exactly as he is.
He casts out the forces which convinced him he was not beloved.

Jesus casts out the unclean spirit which told him he needed to bleach his hands whiter because society made him ashamed of his beautifully dark skin.
Jesus casts out the unclean spirit that told her that her body wasn't just right just the way it is.
Jesus casts out the unclean spirit who told them they couldn't be attracted to the same gender.
Jesus casts out the forces which convinced him his questioning of his gender wasn't a sacred act of self-discovery.

And as Jesus is speaking the man crumbles to the ground and begins to shake. It is an intense first scene y'all! But is not believing this good news which can cast out those unhealthy voices we've absorbed not a battle? Of course it is!

The man falls to the floor and *with a loud voice he cries out*. This part is important. You see, the gospel writer knows what he is doing. Mark's gospel loves to bookend significant moments. Which means that we also hear a loud voice crying out somewhere else in the gospel. A loud voice cries out here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. And it happens again at the very end of Jesus' ministry. After a religious system scapegoats another man; after mocking, abusing, and ultimately putting him on the cursed tree of blasphemy. And as Jesus hangs there, it says Jesus cries out in a loud voice, "Why have you forsaken me?" Which is exactly what those who have been demonized and scapegoated by a system of injustice feel like: forsaken!

The first year Joy and I lived in Seattle we rented an apartment downtown. We only had one car, so on the days Joy worked I walked everywhere. One day I was walking down the main drag to my regular therapy appointment, when I noticed a woman up ahead. She was arguing with invisible people only she could see. She sat down on a front step of a building and continued to talk to herself. As I got closer, I said a brief silent prayer to myself for her under my breath; and as I did she suddenly looked up and locked eyes with me—as if she could hear the prayer in my head. She stared me down and so I stopped in front of her and smiled. Her big brown eyes began to fill with tears, and then she said in a loud voice, "Where were you when I needed you?" To be truthful, I didn't know what to do. It was obvious she needed long term care, not just a prayer

from a stranger who was a seminary student. But her words have stuck with me because they are Jesus' words. "Where were you? Why have you forsaken me?"

And then it hit me: Jesus is not only the presence of resurrection healing in these stories, he is also the one who lives these experiences himself: he is betrayed, denied, forsaken, demonized, scapegoated as the one who carries the sins of the system of injustice because the community doesn't want to have to deal with their own uncleanness.

And then another light bulb went off: this is where his authority comes from. A teacher has no authority unless they have been the student of these experiences themselves. I mean, how often is the ministry we are passionate about and called to directly related to an experience we've had ourselves? A high school student migrated here when he was in middle school. He remembered sitting alone for months at the lunch table while longing for someone to sit with him and get to know him. While the lunch period was only 30 minutes it felt like an eternity sitting there alone. So when he got into high school he created a club called, "No Student Eats Alone." He has several members in the club who greet new kids and go and sit with others who they notice are eating lunch alone. It's powerful. Where does this power come from? A kind heart that has been broken open by an experience of knowing what loneliness feels like. The club now has over 100 Charters across the country—spreading like wildfire. But it began with an experience which is where his authority came from.

As we prepare to ordain a new group of elders and deacons, I want you to know that you have God's authority in you. BUT it is not a power we lord over others but with others. It is not an authority we use to protect ourselves from our hurts. It is the authority that God uses through the authority of our own experience.