

February 1, 2015
"Speaking Truth"
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Mark 1:21-28 They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he 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 silent, 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.

We are now in the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate and consider the means by which Christ becomes visible and known to the world. Today's Gospel text from Mark occurs at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. He goes with his four newly found disciples to Capernaum, into the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach. It was not uncommon at that time for traveling teachers, guest preachers if you will, to stop by and say a word. But something about this guy is different. This one carries an exceptional power, an unusual authority not normally exhibited by the scribes nor recognized by the congregants. This one *really* knows what he's talking about! He doesn't just interpret or extrapolate the Scripture, he embodies it – he lives it. And the message is not necessarily easy to hear or understand, and yet it carries a deep truth. This is a theme in Mark. Most of the time, people, especially his disciples, don't understand or recognize him for who he is. The text says that the congregants were astounded (the Greek word being *exeplessanto*), which carries with it a level of panic and fear. It can mean "dumbstruck." Suddenly, someone speaks out. "What do you want with us? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!"

We are told that the man who speaks out is one with an "unclean or impure spirit," presumably some kind of demonic possession. Father Ron Rolheiser notes that the gospels speak of two types of demonic forces: one that divides us, and one that unites us. The first divides us and tears us apart, through envy, paranoia, jealousy, a sense of being wronged, and bitterness, and it dissolves families, communities, churches, and nations. The other type of demonic force unites us to each other through the grip of mass hysteria that comes of scapegoating and gossip, and leads to the frenzied, mad pitch of the lynch mob or the crowd determined on crucifixion. The unclean spirit in the passage, by use of the plural, "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?" seems intent on riling up the crowd. However, it could also be that this man is tormented within himself. Jesus' presence and authority pierce him to the core, and he becomes defensive, desperately wanting to protect whatever it is that Jesus is challenging him to change, give up, or let go.

It's quite common to perceive this man as the type that would be escorted out or quietly ignored by the "well-to-do" around him. It is tempting to think of this man with the unclean spirit as one who is unclean on the outside – the kind we see in doorways, on street corners, or at the stoplight holding a sign and a cup. Vietnam Vet, Anything will help.

When we hear the passage we are likely to identify with those amazed ones in the pews. I'd like to encourage us today to think about how we identify with the demon-possessed man, who calls out Jesus for what he is, demonstrating the threat that Jesus and his message poses. The threat of destroying us, and what we comfortably rely on to protect our present circumstances. We like to think we are following Jesus and that we support his life-changing message. But again, those "astounded by his teaching" implies an element of fear or panic. And I even wonder if those listening who didn't cry out were somehow *thinking* what this man with the unclean spirit was shouting.

Peter Woods says of this passage, "My experience of Good News preaching is that sooner or later, preaching the Unconditional Acceptance of Jesus will rile someone in the status quo power structure enough, for the demonic in them to manifest. Hearing truth makes us all angry at some point. That is unavoidable."

Recently, my sister and I spent the day at the spa in celebration of a couple of personal milestones. I had a piece of toast before I left, and I mean, we spent *all day* there, so I was really hungry by the time we left (who knew you could work up such an appetite at the spa?). I ran into two groups of friends on the way out (who knew we all spa mid-week in January?) which seemed very serendipitous, and as I was leaving this peaceful setting, I thanked God for my many blessings, for a day of relaxation and connection. To top it off, on the way home, I stopped to pick up a wrap at a local health-food shop, something, like going to the spa, that I rarely do. I was in heaven. I placed the wrap lovingly next to me on the seat as I drove home, looking forward to savoring every bite. When I walked through the door, though, I realized my dog had been inside all day and needed a walk. I decided I would take half the wrap with me on the walk, also something I never do, but I was hungry. I grabbed a package that needed shipping and off my dog and I went to the post office. I opened my back gate, which opens to a bike path, and saw a man on the path that I did not recognize. I wasn't wearing my glasses, so this was not surprising. He was pushing a baby carriage and walking a little dog. "Hi," I said, "how are you doing?" As he approached, I saw that there was no baby in the carriage. It was filled with clothes, bags, sleeping items. He answered me. "We're actually really hungry, if you have some food..."

Now, I like to think of myself as a Christian woman, a follower of Jesus Christ, filled with compassion and solidarity for the needy; after all, I was just ordained as a Reverend. So I was *astounded* at the thoughts that came into my head. I would like to say that I was overflowing with love and generosity of spirit; however, my gut reaction was to say that I had nothing on me, as I protectively held the coveted sandwich in my hand. And as the man said, "I understand," and continued on his way, I heard the voice of Jesus saying so lovingly, "If you have two coats, give one away," and I turned back and offered the man my sandwich. I will admit to you, that I was filled with hesitancy, reluctance, and even resentment. "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" I was minding my own business, just walking along, and suddenly I'm left with no sandwich! "Have you come to destroy us?" Jesus doesn't always meet us where and when it is comfortable and convenient, like when it fits in our schedule to work in the Food Pantry or bring in a dollar or a can of soup. "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." I walked to the post-office, hungry but surely not nearly as hungry as the man I had passed, the man who might very well have been Jesus. "What you have done to the least of these, you have done to me."

God showed up for me in a very unexpected way. We're so sure what we'd do, until we're presented with it unexpectedly. If someone had said, Jesus is going to be coming by your back gate at 3pm, I would have run back inside and given the other half of the sandwich, invited him in, struck up conversation. God confronted me with where I have some work to do, and though catching me off-guard, I was ready and willing to listen. God says, "I'm here for you to be your partner on the journey. I'm going to help shape you so that I can best use you for my purposes. Maybe you fell a bit short this time, you didn't handle it perfectly, and that's ok. By all means enjoy your spa day, and when I show up, next time you can be boundlessly and unrestrictively generous. I'll work with you on this in the meantime."

In coming to terms with the shameful aspects of this experience, I was reminded that I'm in good company. Peter denied Jesus 3 times. "Were you friends with this man?" Peter was asked. "Neeeeuuooooopppp!" said Peter. And yet Peter was forgiven and restored and became the rock upon which the church was built.

For some of you, it's not the coveted sandwich that you're holding on to and reluctant to give up, it's something else. It may be someone you need to forgive, or make amends to; it may be dealing with a relationship that calls for boundaries or a situation that needs addressing. We all have our struggles, and we are all in need of an authoritative Savior to help us. What is the internal struggle from which you need deliverance today? Where are you in need of God's help?

The good news is that when we turn to God, God shows up, accepts us just as we are, and speaks truth to liberate us from our struggles. John 8:31-32 says, "If you continue to follow my teaching, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

In Mark chapter 1, after the man with the unclean spirit confronts Jesus, Jesus rebukes him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" and the unclean spirit convulses him, cries with a loud voice, and comes out. The spirits obey Jesus' command. Perhaps, similarly to the way I handed over my sandwich.

We don't know what happens to the man after this, but we can guess that he was a changed man, changed for the better, because we read that after this, news about Jesus spread throughout the land. Matt Skinner notes that the exorcism doesn't necessarily eliminate evil and oppression, but it denies them the authority to hold ultimate sway over people's lives. Mark depicts Jesus as the one uniquely authorized to declare and institute the reign of God. Through Jesus we glimpse characteristics of this reign. It's not subtle; it is intrusive, breaking old boundaries that benefit another kind of rule. It is about liberating people from the powers that afflict them and keep all creation from flourishing. Through Jesus' authority, souls are set free from destructive tendencies and powers that were thought to be beyond anyone's control. Jesus' authority makes it possible not just to speak about, but to live out, the gospel: if it is between my hunger or yours, I'm going to feed you. This is indeed, a radical and revolutionary message in a self-seeking world.

Everything Jesus says and does is intended precisely to lead us beyond division and dissipation. The kingdom Jesus preaches is about coming together in ways that are healthy and benefit all. The authority of Jesus has power over the demonic forces that divide us in isolation or unite us in hysteria.

His message of salvation is a healing and liberating force. The sick become healthy; the possessed become free, and people on the margins of society experience his loving attention. It is not simply the

content of what he says, but the total event of teaching, preaching, healing, and caring which affects people. He practices what he preaches.

As we partake of the communion meal today, later in the service, let us remember Jesus' ability to feed us, to heal us, to cleanse us from whatever it is that prevents us from experiencing true joy and freedom.