

“A New Teaching—with Authority!”

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, February 1, 2015—Epiphany 4/Ordinary 4

First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Scripture: Mark 1:21-28 (NRSV, adapted)

Mark 1: 21-28



²¹[Jesus and the four fishermen] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²[The worshippers in the synagogue] were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue¹ a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They 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.” ²⁸At once [reports about him] began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

1 Image: <http://bible.archeologie.free.fr/capharnaumsynagogue2.jpg>. This is a photo of the excavated remains of the “White Synagogue,” which was built atop the ruins of the synagogue where Jesus taught and healed.

On the reading table beside my recliner at home, I have recent issues of three different magazines whose cover stories are about the latest advances in brain research. We're living in a time of remarkable progress in such areas as psychiatry and neuroscience; we've left behind those earlier eras where people believed in demon possession and exorcisms. While it's true that Hollywood can use the technology of special effects to make demon possession and exorcisms look real on the silver screen, this is not something we're likely to experience outside the movie theater.

And yet: I remember several years ago seeing eerie photographs of the face of a young man named Jared Loughner, who shot Arizona congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in the face at point-blank range, and also killed six other innocent people and wounded twelve. To remember this devastation, or to see photos of Jared Loughner's face, is to wonder whether demon possession is only a thing of the past.

Which brings me to this morning's story from Mark's Gospel, in which a man possessed by an "unclean spirit," disrupts Jesus' teaching in the Capernaum synagogue and challenges Jesus' authority. From the perspective of the social location of Jesus and his followers, demon possession in the first century was not necessarily what we today would understand to be a medical disease or a psychiatric illness. In fact, there is historical evidence that demonic behavior was both a consequence and a cause of social disruption. So it's not surprising that some Palestinian Jews in the first century, living as they did under the oppressive rule of the Roman empire, would behave in ways that seemed demon-possessed.

There were more than a few first-century faith healers in both Jewish and Gentile settings who were capable of liberating people from the shackles of these kinds of conditions. Jesus of Nazareth was certainly not the only faith healer in the first century, but he was, so far as we know, the only faith healer in the first century who was crucified and raised from the dead. So when we read about Jesus driving out demons, we need to acknowledge that "there must be more to these stories than is immediately obvious to [modern readers like ourselves]."² In other words, Jesus is more than a charismatic teacher and faith healer.

What is at stake in this story, and in other stories like it, is nothing less than Jesus' authority to proclaim and embody the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. It should come as no surprise that the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God would call other kingdoms into question—such as the oppressive Roman empire, or even the religious establishment of the day. By the time today's story begins, Jesus has already been baptized and named as God's beloved Son and tested by Satan, the chief of demons, in the wilderness. He has already begun proclaiming the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. He has already called four fishermen to leave everything behind and follow him and fish with him for people. Now he has come to the synagogue in Capernaum on the sabbath day, when the entire village has gathered for worship and teaching.

Mark's Gospel does not tell us whether Jesus was invited by the leaders of the synagogue or whether he just showed up and took over. In any case, he is teaching,

2 Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man – A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, 141,

and the worshippers in the synagogue are “astounded at his teaching,” possibly because of the content of his teaching, but most certainly because of his charismatic audacity and authority, which stands in sharp contrast to that of the scribes.

Then comes a sudden disruption, in the person of a man with an unclean spirit. And the man, or the unclean spirit, confronts Jesus with these words: “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.” Notice first of all that the man with an unclean spirit does not say, “What do you have to do with *me*, Jesus of Nazareth?” Instead, he says, what do you have to do with *us*? I don't think the “us” is either multiple unclean spirits, or the people in the synagogue who are listening to Jesus' authoritative teaching. Rather (and this only becomes clear in later chapters of Mark), the “us” in this case is the religious establishment, represented by the scribes—who are offended by Jesus' challenge to their cherished authority.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” When we in the 21st century say, “Jesus of Nazareth,” it has very positive associations for us. But when the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue in Capernaum said it, it was an insult. To borrow from Garrison Keillor and “A Prairie Home Companion,” Nazareth was the Lake Wobegon of its time.

Nobody famous had ever come from Nazareth. Nazareth is not mentioned once in the Hebrew Bible. (Bethlehem, by comparison, is mentioned 44 times.) Nazareth was a backwater village in the backwater province of Galilee. Moreover, in Capernaum, Jesus of Nazareth is an *outsider*. “you're not from around here, so who are you to teach us?”

“Have you come to destroy *us*?” Isn't this one of the biggest fears of anyone holding religious and/or political power when they face challenges to their authority? That their challenger will not only take over their position of power, but will also destroy them in the process? Herod the Great was afraid that one of his sons was plotting to destroy him, so he ordered his minions to kill his son.

“I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” In Mark's Gospel, it's usually the disciples who don't know who this Jesus is, or why they are following him, or what he's trying to accomplish. Those closest to him, it seems in this Gospel, are also those who are most clueless about him. But the demons, the unclean spirits, they know who Jesus is, and they know that he is going to overcome them and overturn them. So the man with an unclean spirit starts off by insulting Jesus (“Jesus from that little hick town”), but then ends up honoring Jesus as the “Holy One of God.”

By naming Jesus in this way, the “unclean spirit” is intending to gain power over Jesus. As we might expect, this unclean spirit is no match for Jesus. Jesus is the clear winner in this first encounter with opposition to his ministry. Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing the man and crying with a loud voice, comes out of him. The man's demon doesn't give up without a serious fight—which is almost always the case with demons.

The community of Capernaum, gathered for worship in the synagogue on the sabbath, is astounded by this sudden and unexpected turn of events. The people are

amazed that Jesus of Nazareth has taught with authority and driven out an unclean spirit with authority. They all realize what they have just witnessed. And once they leave the synagogue, they start spreading the word about Jesus, and “[reports about him] begin to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”

I'm not sure that the people's responses to what they have witnessed—their astonishment, their amazement, their reports about Jesus—are entirely positive. In the words of UCC pastor Kathryn Matthews Huey: “When Jesus, this carpenter from dusty little Nazareth, walked into the synagogue and spoke and acted in ways that 'astounded' the people, more than one person must have sensed trouble brewing. Who is this man, they wondered, where did he go to school, and who gave him the right to do these things? Scholars seem to disagree on whether the reaction was positive or mixed; perhaps some loved what they witnessed, and others were disturbed by it. In any case, it was no ordinary 'Sunday in church.'”³

This story from Mark's Gospel gives us some rather significant clues about who this Jesus is and what he's up to. Just as the man with the unclean spirit said, Jesus is the Holy One of God. Just as the people in the synagogue realized, Jesus teaches with an authority greater than that of those with divinity degrees. Jesus possesses the power to liberate people and communities from the spirits and disturbances that keep them captive. But also: just as Jesus' presence was both astonishing and unsettling in a first-century synagogue on the Sabbath, so too Jesus' teaching and authority in the church of the twenty-first century can be both astonishing and unsettling—especially for the “unclean spirits” of our century.

And what are today's “unclean spirits”? Those actions and attitudes which are not consistent with the way and the authority of Jesus. Those actions and attitudes which are in direct opposition to the way and the authority of Jesus. Those actions and attitudes which cause harm and suffering to our fellow human beings and to our home planet. Examples:

- Addictions of various kinds—alcohol abuse, drug abuse, compulsive gambling.
- Violent extremist movements with religious, or pseudo-religious, ideologies, such as ISIS in Iraq and Syria, or Boko Haram in Nigeria, or so-called “Christian” militias in our country;
- Climate change denial;
- Sexual violence, both verbal and physical, directed at girls and women.
- Racism and racial bias directed toward people of color.
- The list could go on.

We who are followers of Jesus may or may not be able to change the world through our actions and attitudes. In fact, this may not even be what God expects of us:

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http://www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds_with_authority_power_to_do?utm_campaign=ws_jan23_15&utm_medium=email&utm_source=unitedchurchofchrist.

to radically transform our broken yet beautiful world. But I do believe that God does expect that we Christians do our best to speak and act in ways that are consistent with what we know about Jesus. I do believe that God expects of Jesus' followers that we will hold ourselves accountable when we fall short of Jesus' teaching and example—which is why one of the foundational forms of Christian prayer is the prayer of confession, when we confess our moral failures and turn to God and one another in search of “forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace.” I do believe that faithfulness to the way of Jesus can and does make a real difference, not only in our personal and family lives, but also in our life together as the beloved community, and in our witness to the conscience of the wider world.

I conclude this morning with a prayer that is the final stanza of a worship song written by one of my wife Mary's colleagues at Yale Divinity School, Tom Troeger. May Tom Troeger's prayer be our prayer as well, especially during those times when we are gripped by “doubts that stir the heart to panic, fears distorting reason's sight, guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with fright”:

Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit,
in our mind and in our heart.
Speak your word that when we hear it
all our demons shall depart.
Clear our thought and calm our feeling,
still the fractured, warring soul.
By the power of your healing

4 Thomas Troeger, “Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit!” (*Chalice Hymnal*, #186).