

Sermon for Sunday, January 28, 2018

Authority

The man in the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus was teaching had “an unclean spirit.” While we don’t know exactly what that was—was he angry, mentally ill, belligerent, bellicose, aggressive?—we also do know what it meant, because we’ve experienced it. A stranger shows up in our sanctuary and he’s odd, peculiar, sketchy, and a bit scary. He’s possessed by an “unclean spirit,” and we really would like him to just go away.

What was this man doing there? He wasn’t a regular at the synagogue. Had he come to disrupt Jesus’ teaching or challenge his ministry? The spirit that possessed him recognized Jesus immediately; knew him to be the “Holy One of God”—a recognition that is kept secret from everyone else in Mark’s gospel until its end—and seems to know that Jesus’ presence is a threat to it—“Have you come to destroy us?” Jesus, the one who teaches with authority, who has authority, who knows the mind of God and lives according to God’s will, commanded the spirit to be silent and to come out of the man. It did. The congregation is relieved, and amazed, and impressed. Jesus has the authority to command even unclean spirits, and they obey him. His fame—which turns out to be a curse—spreads quickly.

What is this authority that the people in the synagogue see in Jesus, that they hear in his teaching, and is demonstrated in his ability to cast out this unclean spirit? That’s the question that haunts us in this text, haunts us, because we don’t see it, at least not yet. It bothers us, however, that the unclean spirit immediately recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God, and we don’t. Or do we? And if we do, does that imply that we are possessed by an unclean spirit?

In Port Huron, Michigan where I ministered for nineteen years, there was a resident whom just about everyone knew. His name was Jack, and he was a street walker. He wasn’t homeless; he had a house that he lived in. And thankfully he was pretty clean, I mean, he didn’t smell bad like others you and I have encountered. But Jack was tall, bearded, kind of scary looking, and usually wore an old trench coat. I never heard him speak. But you would see him everywhere, just walking around the city, Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. He wasn’t a threat, but he still gave people the heebie jeebies. People just didn’t know what to make of him. I think it’s fair to say that he was possessed by an unclean spirit.

One day, he came to our church, entered the sanctuary in the midst of worship, and sat down in a pew near the back, which means not many people saw him, but I did. An usher gave him a bulletin, welcomed him, and helped him identify where we were in the order of worship. I was pleased by our Christian hospitality. After worship, he followed the crowd into our fellowship hall for coffee hour—where we always had quite a nice spread; more than just cookies—and there ate his fill and stuffed his pockets with food before making an early exit. It was no surprise that the following week he skipped worship and just came to coffee hour. After a couple of weeks of that I said to him, “Jack, you are welcome here, but our expectation is that you will come to worship, like everyone else, before you come to coffee hour.” The next week he came to worship, although pretty soon it was just for the last fifteen minutes or so. He liked our coffee hour. People tried to speak with him and we followed up with him as we would with any visitor. After about eight weeks, we didn’t see him again.

While my cynical side suspected that he had located a better deal, my faith side knew that we had scared him off. What he heard in worship, and experienced in our Christian hospitality was an invitation to new life, and the loving embrace of a community of Christ’s disciples, but Jack wasn’t really hungry for that. He just wanted coffee and breakfast.

Jesus said, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst,” and though we make that proclamation when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we know it has nothing to do with food and drink. It has to do with love, unconditional love, the kind of love that comes from God and that through our faith in Jesus Christ we are empowered to offer to others. That kind of love knows that not one of us is without sin, so who are we to judge? That kind of love knows that each of us is possessed in some way with an unclean spirit, be it selfishness, greed, idolatry, hubris, envy, sloth, gluttony, or illness, guilt, grief, physical limitations, or mental illness, and are all in need of God’s healing, saving, redeeming, and restoring love. That kind of love is willing to suffer to love others, as God in Christ suffered to love us.

The authority that the people saw in Jesus, that they heard in his teaching, and was demonstrated in his ability to cast out the unclean spirit, was the authority of God's unconditional love. And because they thought back then that there was a causal relationship between sin and illness, they identified healing with forgiveness. So if Jesus had the power to heal, and to cast out demons and unclean spirits, then he must also have the authority to forgive sin, which he makes explicit a few stories later when he replies to his critics, "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

Let's be clear that the authority to forgive sin is not magic; it's not a power Jesus possesses which works with a wave of his hand. The authority to forgive that which separates us from God is the ability to bridge the gap with God's unconditional love. Jesus loves, as God loves, and that love heals and makes relationships whole again.

The man Jesus met in the synagogue in Capernaum had an unclean spirit. It isolated him from others; people were afraid of him; and he gave people the heebie jeebies. But he came to the synagogue anyway because he desperately wanted to be well, and he was hungry for love, hungry for acceptance, and hungry for community. The unclean spirit in him recognized immediately that Jesus could feed the man's hunger, cast him out, and fill the void he had occupied in the man's soul with eternal love.

Jack wasn't hungry for love, or for acceptance, or for community. He was just hungry for food. And when we offered him love and acceptance and community, as befits the church of Christ, he departed from us. He had no desire to be made well, and Jesus heals no one who doesn't desire it. You see, Jack knew, at least in his heart, that the only way to get one's hunger for love fed, is to love, and that requires commitment, and vulnerability, and trust, and sacrifice, and time for the other. Jesus put it this way: "Come to me" "Believe in me." "I will love you, forgive you, restore you, and heal you that you may love others as I have loved you." This is the good news, and the reign of God that has come near. Jack wanted none of that. He liked being a loner, free as a bird to do whatever he felt like, and whenever he felt like it. He liked being beholden to no one. He was not about to grant Jesus authority over him, even if it was the authority of unconditional love. There is, tragically, a little bit of Jack in us all.

You can't get love without giving love first. And we love only because God first loved us. And because we know how God has loved us—in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. God's love, we know, forgives us, heals us, restores us, mends our brokenness, dispels our guilt, our grief, our anxiety, makes us new and reunites us into the community of God's beloved, which is the church. Love so amazing, so divine, compels us in joy and with thanksgiving to grant God authority over our lives, an authority which makes us better than we were, an authority which makes us generous, and an authority which gives us the courage to be vulnerable with our love, that Jack, and those like him, may one day know the truth that will set them truly free.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' authority and identity as the Son of God is kept secret until the end, recognized in advance only by demons and unclean spirits. It's kept secret at Jesus' insistence, because Jesus knows that until he suffers and dies for the sake of us all, we will not grasp the depth and sacrifice and power of God's love for us. And at the end, at the foot of the Cross, when Jesus breathes his last, it is the enemy of God's people, another unclean spirit if you will, the Roman centurion, who immediately acknowledges that "Truly this man was God's Son!;" the man "who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave," because he gave all authority over himself to God. May we follow him, follow him, follow him, into God's kingdom, and into eternal life.

PRAYER: Almighty God, we acknowledge the unclean spirits within us that separate us from you. But we also desire to abandon them and allow you to replace them with your unconditional love. Help us to grant you, through Jesus, authority over us, the authority to forgive us, to heal us, and to make us whole, that we may never hunger or thirst for love. In the strong name of Jesus Christ our Lord, we ask it. Amen.

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Mark 1:21-28