

Pastor's Message – 2/7/2021  
Mark 1:21-28

The last time I preached on this Bible passage, three years ago, I focused on the power given to followers of Jesus, but, in these last days, individual struggles and the struggles of the world seem to have affected more and more people in deeper and deeper ways. All we have to do is look back over the last year and the division, violence, and evil that has been present and still affects us. People are longing for, have been desperate for, relief and healing. This time, this passage inspires me to reflect on the healing and power of Jesus.

As I read the passage from Mark this year in my preparation for worship, verse 22 really struck me. "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, . . ." In our Bible reading today, we see that Jesus can do mighty works of teaching and healing, and through both, convey the good news of God's imminent kingdom of power over evil and response to human suffering.

What Jesus did next is also interesting. Mark chose to begin the story of Jesus' public ministry with an exorcism. Jesus is in the middle of His sermon in the synagogue one Friday, when suddenly one of the men in the pews shouts out, "Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" Mark says he is possessed by an evil spirit; most likely, we might think of it more as mental illness. Then, Jesus performs an exorcism. For many of us in the twenty-first century, the idea of an exorcism doesn't seem relevant. We can explain medically what was going on with this person, and we fail to see how this story still has a message for us today.

Does it seem at all strange that the man with an unclean spirit worships in the synagogue? It really is not that uncommon to find people in worship who are possessed by addictions, denial, animosity, or simply have "unquiet" minds. Statistics tell that one-third of the population at some point during their lifetimes can be considered to have mental disorders. Even in the twenty-first century, many continue to stigmatize, or at least be uncomfortable with, those who are labeled "mentally ill." Even for those who do not struggle with mental illness, the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated emotional issues as people have to deal with isolation. We can watch most physical ailments improve and heal over time, but emotional trauma is altogether different and mysterious.

Focusing on the evil spirit and trying to explain that in our Bible reading today moves us away from interpreting this story too closely to our own world views in ways that may not be helpful or appropriate. For example, we might imagine that Jesus heals a man with schizophrenia of someone suffering from another form of mental illness, assuming that Jesus "fixes" him. I think the story today is an encounter with evil and Jesus' power and authority over evil and not an encounter with a mental illness.

Jesus is opposed to the power of darkness. Jesus sees His mission in Galilee as preaching the good news of the coming reign of God and casting out of demons. In

numerous places in the gospels He confronts them, defeats them, and casts them out of people's lives. We need to understand what that means in our context, but in so doing, we modern, sophisticated people should not dismiss the reality of evil or its effect in our lives too quickly. One need not look further than the daily newspaper (or the television or internet or radio) news to see the ancient struggle between good and evil. One need not look far beyond the mirror to know that same battle rages in each one of us.

Jesus stood (and still stands) in opposition to the things that keep us from fully experiencing the joy, community, and purpose for which we have been created. Not only does Jesus try to inspire the crowd with his words and teaching, but he also immediately puts Kingdom of God principles into practice by providing healing and freedom to someone who was deemed "unclean." Mark wants us to know that our God is not the God of the people who think and act as if they have it all together. Jesus, instead, meets people in their brokenness and commences to break down every boundary we put in place or think is insurmountable to overcome.

The authority of Jesus was expressed in word and deed. He impressed the congregation with his authority and astonished them with his authority to cast out a demon. Jesus' authority was different from other religious leaders. Jesus had the authority of His identity as "the Holy One of God." It was an authority without authoritarianism. His authority was based on who He was and on His motives. Jesus does not command authority for the sake of raising Himself up or accumulating power for Himself, but rather to liberate and heal others.

A man was in "church" worshiping and listening to a sermon by the best preacher ever to come on earth. An "unclean" person is one possessed by an evil spirit. Is it strange he would be in church? This reminds us that evil is present in people who are faithful, religious persons. The devil can exist in the church. Christians are not perfect people. The church is not a museum of saints, but a hospital of diseased people in need, perhaps longing, for a cure.

The challenge in reflecting theologically about the demonic is that contemporary Christians in the mainline denominations do not take the demonic and cosmic dimension of evil seriously enough. It is not helpful for us to carry any kind of simplistic belief in demons or demon possession. For example, people with mental illness are not "possessed." Yet, the existence of mental illness and physical illness is an example of the fallen nature of God's creation, of the demonic that seeks to corrupt God's good creation.

Demonic forces are not revealed as we usually imagine Satan: a red-skinned, fork-tailed humanoid carrying a three-pronged pitchfork. Evil is manifested in more subtle and hidden ways. Evil takes many forms in life. Evil steals innocence. We are too often influenced, if not controlled, by such things as addiction, mob mentality, and our own weaknesses and compulsions. The evil of the world is more than just the collective sins of humanity. We are caught in a web of evil that distorts our souls, individually and corporately.

Our gospel reading today can help us to see the demonic and spiritual dimension of evil. How many times do we see evil or hear about evil that seems to be more destructive, intractable, and senseless than human weakness could explain? There are too many examples of the terrible nature of evil in our world: racism, cruelty, pointless hopelessness, and self-defeating behavior. The Bible actually helps us to an understanding of the demonic as the inexplicable corruption of God's good creation. As the Epistle to the Ephesians says, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

There is a larger issue at work here. In one sense, we are like the man with the unclean spirit. Along with the rest of creation we have been influenced by demonic forces. We know nothing about the man before he became the vehicle for the unclean spirit, but we know he was not himself. Neither are we. We do not know if the man was aware of his possession, but often we are not aware of the ways we have been corrupted by the demonic forces.

Just as Jesus faced a spiritual battle in his ministry, so the church faces a spiritual battle in its ministry in the world. Despite our sinfulness, as followers of Jesus, the risen Christ, who has defeated sin and death, calls the church to continue the ministry of healing and opposition to the demonic. Even if we don't believe in the actual existence of entities that can be called demons or unclean spirits, the evil of the world seems tenacious, intractable, and even cunning. Certainly, the evil of the world seems larger, more senseless and ferocious than humans should be capable of committing. Part of the ministry of the church is to oppose things in the world that seem demonic: racism, injustice, torture, oppression, addiction, hatred, exploitation, and a host of others. Even things we consider good, such as American military might, can be either demonic, or corrupted by demonic forces. These things seem demonic because they are so destructive and self-defeating. They serve no purpose and certainly oppose God's will for creation. They destroy people's lives and cause untold misery.

Even if it is frustrating to do such battle, the church is called to be in conflict with these demonic forces. The implication of the exorcism story in Mark 9:17-31 is that the church can engage in this battle with faith and prayer. Just as Jesus' teachings and actions were congruent, so the church must maintain integrity between word and deed, if we are to bear witness to a world suffering from, yet oblivious to, the demonic forces.

The church is called to stand in opposition to the demonic forces in creation. In worship, proclamation, nurture, witness, outreach, and justice ministries, the church confronts the forces that seek to corrupt God's good creation. The risen Christ works within the church in these ministries. We do not see unclean spirits leave dramatically as in this passage, but we see the church's victories over the demonic forces in society. We could think of many examples of how the church has successfully worked at reconciliation, the alleviation of suffering, reduction of violence, the reclaiming of lost

lives. Each of these is a manifestation of God's victory through Christ over the demonic forces, and the coming near of the realm of God.

"Everyone needs compassion, a love that's never failing; let mercy fall on me. Everyone needs forgiveness, the kindness of a Saviour, the Hope of nations." That's the beginning of our opening music today. "In the midst of life, we are in death. From whom can we seek help?" Those are the opening lines from the Committal Service at a graveside. "Hey God, we need some help down here ..." are lines from a song by Mitch Rossell. The prayers from Mitch Rossell's song, the words of from the Committal service, the opening lines of our first music selection are not limited to any one nation. They are universal longings and a desperation of each person. I could have sung Steve Green's song, "People need the Lord" at worship today as I have on other Sundays in the past.

The Church cannot wrap a cloak around itself, cannot build walls or condone the building of walls and policies that keep people out and away but must call, invite, and welcome all people who struggle with the evils around us and within them yet long for deliverance from evil. People need the healing that Jesus offers, and that healing is within Jesus' followers as well.

Jesus Himself said to His followers, "anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works." Jesus demonstrated the power of God in the world both over spiritual and material evil. As Jesus' followers, we are called to do the same.

People are longing for a Saviour; people are longing to see and hear the good news that evil will not have the last word and there is hope in the present and for the future. The kingdom cannot wait. There is no place for laziness or procrastination. The time to act is now.

A spiritual dimension to sin exists, and the church is called to identify it and battle against it. The church by its witness, attitudes, and action shines a light for all the world to see. The church, in its faithfulness to Jesus' command shares its gifts from God with confidence and trust in God. Only God can ultimately win the battle, but the church keeps up the resistance, as an act of faithfulness to God, and for the sake of those hurt most by the world's evil.

We heard it again today, Mark's favorite word – suddenly, just then, immediately. Mark's whole Gospel contains a sense of urgency and importance. Jesus announces and demonstrates the arrival of the Kingdom of God: a Kingdom that has come and is still with us today. Often in the gospels, demons have more knowledge of who Jesus really is than those witnessing the scene. People long to see Jesus – are desperate for hope and long to feel the love of Jesus in their lives. That is our call, that is our privilege – so share the light and love of God others might live. That takes energy and commitment and perseverance. Believe the good news; share the good news; be the good news. God is with us: holy and just, faithful and true and worthy to be praised!