

January 31st, 2021

Mark 1:21-28 “When Religion Becomes Toxic”

We had *fun* with Jonah last week. We were all able to put our Sunday School hats on and jump into one of the most exciting and dare I say funniest stories in the Old Testament. I mentioned about how much fun it was as a kid to set the scene for Jonah’s story on a flannel board. Good times. And then there’s this week’s scripture. Try as I might, I just cannot remember ever seeing a flannel board about the story of Jesus casting out an unclean spirit at a synagogue in Capernaum. So I wondered, “Do they still even make flannel board stuff anymore?” And you know what? They sure do! I found “Felt figures for Flannel Board Bible Study” on Amazon and Pinterest! But try as I might, I couldn’t find anything about this story. Oddly enough, I found one about Jesus casting out the demon called “Legion,” but that one has pigs so ... you know ... kids like pigs. But, yeah, the story that Mary just read is ... uncomfortable.

Most of the time, we have no idea what to do with stories like this. For people in Jesus’ day, someone walking around with an unclean spirit seemed like just a part of everyday life. “Hi honey, how was your day? Oh, it was going pretty well until I ran into a person possessed by an unclean spirit!” We just don’t hear things like this, or at least when we do, we don’t take them very seriously. So what do we do with a story like this then? We do what we always do when we run into a tough scripture ... we approach it by the grace of God and see where the Spirit leads us.

So. Lets jump in. The first thing I want you to notice - Demonic spirits are in conflict with Jesus. I know that sounds obvious, but in this story, the first thing the unclean spirit does is scream, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” Then Jesus tells it to shut up and he banishes it. In Mark’s gospel, the writer uses the words “demon” and “unclean spirit” interchangeably. And you might think, “Okay, that’s just two names for the same thing.” But here in this

story, he describes it as an unclean spirit. And I suspect that the reason for that is that this isn't long after Jesus' baptism. Say what? Bear with me. Maybe what we have here is Mark showing us a contrast between the Holy Spirit that was present at Jesus' baptism and this unclean spirit in the synagogue. Mark is known for making comparisons and highlighting contrasts. He'll sandwich a story between two halves of another story to emphasize a point. In this case, we have a contrast between the Holy Spirit and the unclean spirit, and the only thing sandwiched in between them is the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. So what we have, right from the start, is the message that when we are called to follow Jesus, we are called to take sides in a conflict between two opposing kinds of spiritual powers.

The second thing I want you to notice is the close relationship between this spiritual conflict and the *teaching* ministry of Jesus. Mark's gospel is the one that quotes the *content* of Jesus' teaching the least. Mark contains fewer parables than Matthew or Luke. There's no sermon on the mount, and none of the long teaching speeches that appear in John's gospel. And yet, Mark's gospel refers to Jesus as "teacher" the most. Over and over the crowds react to what he does by remarking on his teaching. This story is a perfect example of that. The crowd says, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." Think about this - When we return to the sanctuary eventually, if we had some big open manifestation of an unclean spirit here and it threw someone into a screaming fit and I rebuked it and cast it out, I don't think you'd all go home saying, "What do you make of this new teaching we had this morning?"

But over and over in Mark's gospel, Jesus casts out demons or heals the sick and the crowds respond by marveling at his teaching. Was he "teaching" when he was doing this? Not necessarily, but they were acts that pointed to the content of his teaching. So the message is, when people accept Jesus' teachings things change. People are healed and cleansed and set free. For Mark, Jesus' words aren't as important as how people respond to his teachings. They change us from the inside out.

And guess what? That's a threat to some folks. It is no coincidence that totalitarian regimes around the world are almost always involved in censorship of books, news, and teaching materials. In order for the regime to survive, they need to limit what is taught, because if teaching opens the people's eyes, you're going to lose power over the people. That is exactly what is going on here. When Jesus begins teaching the way of freedom and salvation, something actually happens. The *people* get excited but the *opposition* rises up in both spiritual and human forms. Here in this story, the unclean spirit screams and not long after this, the corrupt religious leaders and the corrupt government leaders make an alliance to work together to silence Jesus by killing him.

Ready for the third thing to think about? Okay, where does this all take place? In a synagogue. Why is an unclean spirit lurking around a synagogue? Remember what I said about Mark making "scripture sandwiches?" Think about this. The first thing Jesus does at the start of his public ministry is cleansing this synagogue. The first thing he does when he enters Jerusalem for the last time before he is put to death is cleanse the *temple* of the money changers who he said were defiling the temple. The cleansing of the synagogue sets the wheels in motion for the powers that be to oppose him. It also sets the wheels in motion for his death at those powers who were threatened by his teaching. So the two places where Jesus identifies, confronts, and chases away unclean spirits are places reserved for worship, teaching, and sacrifice. In other words, the church of that time. Uh-oh. Does that mean that unclean spirits can exist in the church?

Well, according to Mark's gospel, the unclean or demonic powers are usually in places where there's religious activity or where Jesus is teaching. So what was Jesus teaching, that warrants such a fierce push-back from these demonic forces? Why does it seem like these "holy places" are so susceptible to unclean spirits? I think it's because wherever something good or "holy" is taking place, the forces of evil are going to try to reclaim that territory. "That sure sounds Pentecostal Jesse." Okay. I'll own that. But think about what has happened

throughout the history of the church. In the middle ages, the church became obsessed with trying to get a seat at the table of Kings and rulers. Church leaders fell in love with the power and perks that came along with these unholy alliances. It kept growing and growing until reformers like Luther came along and said, “Enough is enough. You’ve lost sight of Jesus and Jesus’ teachings.” The unclean spirit that was running rampant in the church was pardoning people’s sins if they paid money for “indulgences.” To heck with repentance! Break out the checkbook! The church claimed control over people’s fates. They prescribed rules that limited people’s freedom. They judged who was clean and unclean. They kept the scriptures out of the hands of average people keeping them in the dark about what Jesus really taught as opposed to what the church told them he taught. Jesus critiqued and challenged corrupt “holiness systems.” He took bold action against them. He made it abundantly clear in word, deed, and action that God’s love and mercy will not be bound and regulated by un-holy, demonic systems. “There you go sounding Pentecostal again Jesse.” Yup. And again, I’ll own it.

Lately, one of our own Disciples of Christ Ministers, Rev. William Barber II, has been calling out the demonic forces that have taken control of very high-profile churches who are scrambling for a place at the table where they can gain power and wealth. Most of the time at the expense of the poor and powerless ... the same people that Jesus ministered to. And, as you might expect, Rev. Barber is receiving a lot of pushback. Just like other reformers throughout history did when they shed light on the unclean spirits that infiltrated the church. Just like Jesus did when he called them out and cast them out in the synagogues.

So what should we do? We should do as Jesus does of course. We should be calling out those forces ... those unclean spirits. And we should not be surprised when they turn on us and say, “What have you to do with us, you liar? The church is being destroyed by these things you and your kind are teaching. You come in here claiming to represent God, but we know who you are. You are an agent of evil, a blasphemer, a

compromiser with evil. You and everyone who swallows what you say are going straight to hell.”

Most of us have heard those voices, especially when we preach the radical news that God loves even those who seem most despicable to us. Then suddenly we're gripped by the spirit of rejection and hostility and their need to control and oppose and expel. And like this man in Mark's story, we become fragmented and at war with ourselves; one part of us excited by the possibility of freedom, and something else within us clinging to our demons and our old rigid understandings of clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable.

But look at the wonderful news in this story. Not only is Jesus always on the side of freedom and truth and liberation, and not only does he have the authority to stand up to and banish these demonic forces that threaten to corrupt the church, but he can distinguish between these unclean spirits and those of us who sometimes get ourselves in their grip. Throughout scripture, even though Jesus stood up to and banished unclean spirits, he was able to distinguish the demon from the person. After casting out unclean spirits, Jesus stretches out the hand of mercy to the person ... the human. And all the people were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!” And this is the content of what Jesus was teaching: Even if you have fallen into the grip of addictive, controlling, possessing demonic forces that overpower you, and stifle you, and fragment you, and turn you into an angry, nasty, fearful, repressive, religiously intolerant, opponent of everything, God still loves you and is reaching out the hand of friendship to you and longs to set you free and welcome you back into the family of love and grace.