

E4B 2021 Mark 1:21-28

Today's gospel is an exercise in humility for any of us who have ever served as pastors or Sunday school teachers: Mark tells us the people were astounded at Jesus because he taught with authority, unlike the scribes—that is, the teachers and preachers of the day. The scribes in the Capernaum synagogue were probably doing their best, as we all do, but when the people listened to Jesus, they heard more than somebody *talking* about the word of God; they encountered the Word of God himself. Still, the synagogue existed before Jesus arrived; it continued after he left. When the building in which Jesus taught was destroyed, another synagogue was built in its place and lasted for centuries. The poor Capernaum scribes were no match for Jesus, but they had managed to gather a community of faithful followers who regularly showed up in order to connect in some way with the Divine. And it's significant that this crowd of faithful sabbath students included the man with the unclean spirit.

In our enlightened, contemporary, mainline Protestant life, we don't speak much about literal demons or evil or unclean spirits. Scholars guess that some of the possessed people in the gospels probably suffered from medical conditions that today we would diagnose and treat in terms of science. That's not to say that Jesus' healing was any less miraculous, just that their disease probably had an explanation other than demon-possession. But this time Jesus is definitely dealing with supernatural evil: the unclean spirit has a conversation with Jesus; it recognizes Jesus, guesses that Jesus will destroy it, and obeys Jesus' command to be silent and leave. The crowds are amazed, and Jesus' fame begins to spread; he has done something new by freeing the man of the unclean spirit.

I mentioned that we don't talk much about literal demons or evil, but sometimes we do retain that language to describe figuratively those things to which we feel helplessly bound: addiction, depression, illness for which we have not found effective treatment, and some of the broader systems in our world that work against healing and wholeness and life. For those who have never suffered such afflictions, it's hard to understand why someone can't simply apply more will-power or work harder to overcome those obstacles. But this story clearly shows us that there are some circumstances that are entirely beyond our control. Here the whole conversation happens between Jesus and the unclean spirit; the man himself does not speak or act. Jesus deals directly with unclean spirit because there are some evils that are entirely beyond the hope of human agency. Some problems are so big, only God can tackle them.

This should remind us to be gentler and more merciful, both with ourselves and with others. If you've never had the experience before, we've certainly all gotten a taste within this last year of what it is like to be at the mercy of forces that are beyond our control. In the midst of our current fear and frustration, we have some guidance to protect ourselves and keep each other safe. But sometimes even that measure of comfort and control is unavailable to us. Sometimes we ask God to intervene because we've done all we can do. Sometimes we place our hope in God because we are wise enough to know we are powerless. Sometimes it seems our prayers are answered; sometimes not. After all, Jesus didn't heal everyone who was ill, or drive out every unclean spirit, or multiply loaves and fish for every meal.

It's human nature to want to *do* something, so it's hard to read this passage and admit that sometimes there is nothing we can do—that God will choose to act, or not, without our input. Yet, notice where this story takes place—in the synagogue. The man with the unclean spirit was still included in this faith community. We don't know if someone helped him get there, or encouraged him to come, or welcomed him, or only tolerated his presence; but this man who was clearly afflicted by something that neither he nor anyone else could control was part of the congregation. It was because he was there in the presence of people who sought the presence of God that he was able to be freed from the spirit that possessed him.

We haven't been able to be together physically for some time, but we've tried very hard to gather over that distance in different ways so that we can still be part of a community where the word of God is spoken. We are called to be a fellowship that welcomes all people so that with us, they may be in the presence of the Divine—especially when they are struggling. When we see that we ourselves are bound by things beyond our control, when we are in the worst shape, that may be the best time for us to come and see God at work on our behalf.

In just a few weeks, we will begin the Lenten season of repentance. Sometimes the effort of Lenten discipline focuses our attention a little too intently on what we think we are able to accomplish. Instead, that time of reflection should ultimately remind us that even with our most sincere effort, we cannot save ourselves. For some brokenness, repair is not enough; only resurrection will do. In a world that tells us to be fiercely independent and wholly self-sufficient, Jesus calls us to gather in community so together we can see God do what only God can do. May we continue to faithfully gather—in whatever way we can—around the word of God, and may we be delightfully amazed to see God's freeing power at work.