

Once More, With Authority

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and 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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They 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." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Most of you, by now, have figured out that I like to learn. I like to know stuff. One of my favorite things to study has been languages. I have studied three ancient languages and two modern ones – not counting English. The first ancient language I studied was Coptic – an Egyptian language that wasn't written down until the Greeks came exploring. So it's an Egyptian language that uses the Greek alphabet.

My friend Katie and I were excited when we got far enough in the class that we started translating sentences. Toward the end of the semester, we felt confident when we translated the sentence "be quiet and walk away." But when we got to class, our teacher told us we had missed the emphasis in that phrase. It wasn't really, "be quiet and walk away." The better translation was, "Shut up and go away!" What's the difference? Well, imagine what would change in our reading this morning. Jesus said to the unclean spirit, "Be silent, and come out of him," or, "Shut up and go away!"

Emphasis makes a difference. In this story, Jesus doesn't do it through word choice or even the inflection of his voice. It's a sort of intangible characteristic that Jesus has that the scribes do not. It's right there at the beginning. The crowd was astonished, because Jesus taught with authority. They were astonished for two reasons. First, Jesus was a nobody. He only gathered his first disciples recently. He is an unknown, and certainly not actually authorized by

anyone to do any teaching. Second, even the scribes, those who did have authority to teach, didn't teach with the kind of conviction and influence that Jesus presented.

Jesus' authority was so compelling that it is the main point of this story. Jesus was teaching with authority all morning. Who can remember what he was teaching about? Trick question! It is not recorded; not one word or idea of what he said. Apparently, what Jesus was teaching was far less important to this crowd than how he was teaching. Even the exorcism, when Jesus casts out an unclean spirit, is of secondary importance to the crowd.

But there is another witness to this event who understands Jesus' authority in a different way. And that witness is the unclean spirit. For a few minutes, let's bracket the question you're all thinking – what exactly is an unclean spirit? I promise we'll address that, but we have to look at a couple other things first. So for the moment, just go with it, okay?

It's interesting that the spirit actually speaks this morning. Let's hear his words again, but this time, let me read his dialogue backward. "I know who you are – the holy one of God! Have you come to destroy us? What do you want from us?" He knows who Jesus is! Because Jesus is just barely getting started with his ministry, the spirit knows far more than the crowd about who this guy is. But the spirit doesn't linger on that identification. He doesn't care who Jesus is or where he gets his authority from. Instead, the spirit's concern is how Jesus plans to use his authority.

"Have you come to destroy us? What do you want from us?" The spirit thinks that God sent Jesus to bring judgment. To destroy. At this point, we better figure out whose voice is really speaking. Is this the spirit's voice? Or is it the voice of the man who has the spirit? It makes a difference, because of the question of destruction. Is he worried about the destruction of spirits or the judgment of people? Both seem to be valid expectations of what God might do if he came

among us somehow. So which is it? Did Jesus come to judge people's sins or to destroy unclean spirits?

As it turns out, neither. Jesus doesn't destroy the unclean spirit. He removes it from the person. Okay, now let's get back to our question. What exactly is this 'unclean spirit?' My friend Sarah has been agnostic her whole life, and just now has started reading the Bible. I told her to start with the gospel of Mark, because it's the shortest. When she finished, she called me up and wanted to know, "what's the deal with all the spirits? Do Christians really believe in ghosts and spirits?" Well, the truth is that some do cling to a literal interpretation, but for most of us, a 1st century worldview is less than helpful for understanding evil in the 21st century.

Let's face it, humanity just knows a lot more about how things work than we did 20 centuries ago. Think, for example, about the way we have re-thought the concept of mental illness. At one time, we blamed demons or spirits. That person was to be pitied, but not blamed. He or she might have to be restrained, for his or the public's own good, but that was understood to be the fault of the unclean spirit, not the person himself. Then we shifted to thinking that people who saw hallucinations, heard voices, harmed themselves, etc., could really stop it if they wanted. Somehow, now it was their fault.

Now we understand that it's not a choice; it's chemistry. You can make certain choices about how you respond to a diagnosis of mental illness, but you can't choose whether you have it. We understand something of the same thing about alcoholism and other addictions. While people can control what they do about having the illness, they cannot control the fact that they have the illness.

What if we understood 'unclean spirits' in the same way? As something that is outside of ourselves, beyond ourselves, which we cannot control? Maybe the word 'spirit' is the problem.

What we are talking about is “otherness.” Whether we personify it, as in this story, or call it sin, or mental illness, or brain damage, it is completely ‘other’ and ‘apart’ from the person. We are all, to some extent, captive to forces beyond our control. The economy, actions of major corporations, even the weather and our own biology. Preacher Julie Adkins has taken this concept to a communal level as well. She says,

What if we thought about our myriad social problems as being the work of unclean spirits? When we see people behaving in criminal ways: can we first see the social structures that have left people with no good choices? When we see unbelievable greed at work, can we first see a society’s warped values and emphasis on “whoever dies with the most stuff, wins?” When we shudder before what seems to be mindless violence, can we step back and first look at the subtle violence of racism, and poverty, and corruption before we work on the necessary steps to protect ourselves from those who would do us harm?

There is evil in the world. We’ve all seen it. But evil is not of God. It is other than and apart from God. And since we were created by God – and in his image no less – evil is other than and apart from us. God chooses not to destroy evil, but instead to separate it from us. To return us to the way we were lovingly created to be.

To be honest with you, I think if God could destroy evil, he would. But I don’t think it’s possible without taking away free will. Remember that day in high school physics when you got all confused because the teacher said that coldness doesn’t exist? And you were like, “but I love ice cream?” Coldness doesn’t exist – but an absence of heat does exist. We can’t measure coldness. We can measure how much heat we do (or don’t) have.

What if evil can’t be destroyed because it doesn’t exist – in the same way that coldness doesn’t. What if evil is actually just the absence of God? The more of God we choose, the more perfect the world becomes. The more we see and experience the Kingdom of God. The less of God we choose, the greater hold evil has in our world. And like Adkins said, this is a communal

effort. I can choose God 100% of the time with all my heart, and all my soul, and all my mind. But if my neighbor chooses evil, those consequences will seep into my life.

And so Jesus didn't come to destroy the unclean spirit. He removed it from the man. He removes our sin from us. Our addiction. Our evil. But he doesn't destroy it. It continues and persists in the world. Nor did Jesus come to judge our sin – but, again, to help us separate from it. And we do that in part by our own choices. Choosing to listen to and follow Jesus. Choosing God over evil. And we do it in part by relying on the grace and mercy of God. And so we need to be in an ongoing relationship with Jesus. We need to ask God to separate our truest, best, created selves from the evil we have chosen or been surrounded by. Because when we ask God to separate the uncleanness, the otherness, from our lives and our culture, suddenly we can see one another the way Jesus sees us. And suddenly we can understand why God loves us desperately, no matter what we've done. Amen and amen.