

“SUBMITTING TO AUTHORITY IS GOOD FOR YOU”

Mark 1:21-28

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Give this passage from Mark’s Gospel to ten different preachers and they’ll preach ten different sermons because there are multiple themes to be mined from these seven short verses.

First there’s the theme of demon possession, second divine healing and third the question of authority.

Feeling ambitious I decided to combine these three themes into one sermon since demon possession, healing and authority are issues that confront us all the time. That may seem an odd thing to say, but bear with me.

Mark reports Jesus went to a local synagogue. Already having the reputation for being a rabbi preceded him he was asked to speak. Immediately the worshippers are impressed, especially since he was so young and not a professionally trained religious leader like the scribes and Pharisees. Like most of them, Jesus is just a regular blue collar type of guy, a carpenter, and yet the people sensed something about Jesus that made him stand out from the crowd. He spoke with authority. In other words Jesus didn’t just regurgitate the same warmed over nostrums the scribes and Pharisees repeated over and over again. Instead, Jesus breathed new life and depth into the old scriptures with insights that drew the people into the mystery of God. They suddenly realized they were hearing the very voice of God speaking through this itinerate rabbi who showed up unannounced to their village.

Then, suddenly and unexpectedly Jesus’ sermon revealing these new and wonderful interpretations of the scriptures was interrupted and as we shall soon see, put to the test when one of the members of the congregation violently disrupted their worship. It soon becomes obvious the man was possessed by an unclean spirit or a demon. Being from the spirit world, the demon not only recognized Jesus’ authority he knew Jesus as the source of that authority. Terrified the demon screamed through the unfortunate man, ‘Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the holy one of God.’

Picture this scene in your mind’s eye and then put yourself in the middle of it by seeing yourself as one of the worshippers who were watching all this unfold before their eyes. You, like them, are shocked, confused and afraid. You didn’t expect something as disruptive as this happening when you went to church this morning.

Mark reports Jesus immediately silenced the demon, cast it out of the man and healed him, leaving the people even more astounded. He wasn’t only a great teacher, he was an exorcist too! Needless to say after this happened Jesus’ fame spread even quicker than before.

Let's now take a closer look at the three themes I identified earlier, and how they are intertwined into the larger theme of salvation.

First, the unclean or demonic spirit. Maybe it's not so ironic that Jesus' first public encounter with the presence of evil (remember this happened just after his solitary forty-day ordeal of temptation in the wilderness) takes place in a house of God.

What should that tell you? It tells me God's people, including you and me, are by no means immune to the powers of darkness. The Evil One, sometimes called Satan, which means "great deceiver" or as the Apostle Paul put it, "the powers and principalities of this present age," which means presence of evil permeating our institutions and culture, this Evil One has an incentive to especially make God's people miserable because whenever you find yourself on the verge of a spiritual growth spurt, the devil wants to frustrate you.

Maybe you've noticed that whenever you've been determined to do something for the greater good, that's when your determination comes under attack. You begin having doubts, you get lazy or you start getting opposition from unexpected places which wears you down and deflates your spirit. You wonder, "What happened to my grand desire to see it through, why am I demoralized, why am I so ready to quit even before I get started?"

Too often you and I get sidetracked, become neutralized and then retreat back into ourselves before we even get started the temptation to cave into those unclean taunting voices tempt us to give into our fears and insecurities through voices that are not of God. If you listen to these voices long enough you start believing them. "I'll always be the same, I'll never be free, I'll never accomplish anything that will stand the test of time."

That's when we need to be reminded this unclean presence and not you, is the one out of place and out of sync in God's Kingdom. An unclean spirit doesn't belong in your life any more than a virus that invaded a sterile operating room.

Unclean spirits tempting us away from doing the heavy lifting that brings about freedom and new life are really all about bringing the chaos that ends in a cold emptiness devoid of hope and joy. Unclean spirits are real, not fairy tales made up to scare little children, but a real potent force to be reckoned with. Doubt their existence at your own peril. Believe they exist, but also realize this manifestation of evil may frustrate you but cannot destroy you because there is an even higher power and authority waiting to come to our rescue. And I can say that because of Jesus' intervention that saved that man from the unclean spirit.

Here's what I mean. The more I contemplated the themes of demonic possession, healing and authority found in this passage the more I wondered what was a man possessed by an unclean spirit doing in that synagogue in the first place? Why did the unclean spirit even allow that man to go to worship that morning in the first place? Then it hit me. That unfortunate man went to the synagogue that morning for the same reason you and I came to church this morning or any morning. Sometimes we come here bringing our own overwhelming problems. You see, even though he was a captive of the darkness, his captivity wasn't complete. Somehow he knew he was still under the authority of God and God wasn't

about to give up on him. Perhaps the man heard that Jesus of Nazareth, who already earned his reputation for being a healer was in town so he forced himself to drag himself, against all odds to that synagogue hoping to be set free.

Earlier I said you may probably identify with the people in the congregation who were shocked, confused and afraid when they saw what was happening. But I hope you can also identify with this possessed man because in so many ways his story is our story. You see despite everything that's wrong with you and me there's always a part of us longing to be healed and made whole, and we won't be at peace until we find it

I'm always impressed when I hear about someone whose life is in turmoil for whatever reason, and overcomes the temptation to give up and still goes to church looking for comfort and healing.

Why is that? On a rational level it makes no sense, how can singing a few hymns and listening to a sermon liberate you from whatever it is that poisons their lives?

Of course if someone in that state of mind decides to try out a church, if there is going to be any hope of healing the congregation needs to be healthy and welcoming to all comers. Imagine what would happen if that person stumbled into a judgmental, dysfunctional church. Right away the vibes coming from the people will give off the unspoken message, 'What is that 'sick one' doing here in our church.'" That's when they close ranks and isolate the sick one hoping he or she won't come back. Why would they do that? Because if they didn't they'd then be forced to take a hard and painful look at themselves. It's easier to say, "We're all fine, it's him, he's the sick one, not us!"

That's the attitude that frustrated Jesus when he tried to get the Pharisees, the scribes and the Sadducees, the respectable religious people to welcome the outcasts and sinners into the faith community. Jesus realized the religious types were possessed too, by their self-righteous respectability.

Which now brings us to the question of authority. Remember, the common folk sensed an authority in Jesus that was lacking in their religious leaders. Their authority was based on a false premise, they had authority, or so they thought, because of their education and place in society. Their authority was institutional the trappings of their authority came from the temple, the synagogue, the special clothes they wore, their high positions, their respectability.

Now look at Jesus. His authority came only from God. He was obedient, he submitted to God's will. He got beyond keeping the letter of the law and radically embraced the spirit of the law. His authority came from surrendering his authority by becoming a servant. He never burdened people, forcing them to accept his way, he let them choose, he respected the gift of free will. He never dominated, he always liberated. Yes he judged, but unlike the worse of the scribes and Pharisees he judged with understanding, mercy and forgiveness.

Somehow Jesus' way seemed more palatable to the common people. They learned through Jesus God never wants to be feared, God always wants to be loved, by us, his children

so when he loves us back his love will free us to want to know love and serve him better than before.

We are left to speculate what might have happened if that man with the unclean spirit went to church that morning hoping to see Jesus but he wasn't there. How would have the others treated him, as someone to be avoided? But Jesus was there and his presence made all the difference. Yes the man was healed but I'm sure at least some of the others who were also there received a healing too when they saw first-hand the authority of God, in the flesh through Jesus.

What's more the authority Jesus demonstrated wasn't something Jesus kept all to himself. Instead, it was his intention to share his authority with anyone who follows him. And I can say that because later in Mark's Gospel we read:

"Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits." (Mark 6:2)

Did you hear that? Jesus shares his authority with the likes of you and me. Through your baptism, you already have everything you need to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, befriend the friendless and kick out demons. You have the power to do what Jesus did. What did Jesus say just before he ascended into heaven?

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

The question is will you and I accept that authority that's been already given? Be forewarned, it will cost you, but it's worth it.

Chances are you are here this morning because you know you need healing and Jesus can give it to you. But you should also know with your healing there comes the responsibility to also let Jesus give you his authority to be and make the difference in other people's lives.

Let's pray we make the right choice.