

Sermon for Sunday January 28, 2024

It's a strange thing when a bunch of people suddenly realize that you have particular gifts or skills and laud you for it.

Because as sure as the sun rises in the morning, at some point or another they will suddenly dislike you and claim that you either aren't doing things right or that you are a stuck-up so-and-so and you're not really all that fabulous.

That's the situation that Jesus finds himself in in today's Gospel. In Mark's telling of the story, it's very early in Jesus' ministry. He comes to the town of Capernaum and is teaching at the synagogue – a normal thing for an itinerant rabbi like Jesus to do – and he is blowing away all who hear him. You can imagine what they're saying:

“Wow, I never thought of it that way before!”

“He teaches as if he was hearing the voice of the Lord himself.”

“His teaching and preaching style is like that of a much older, more experienced rabbi. Where did he learn how to do it so well?”

And then something happens.

There's a fellow in the crowd, someone who has been troubled by possession by unclean spirits. All the crowd knows him. He's the kind of person who mutters to himself all the time, who sometimes has what we'd think of as epileptic seizures, who is very odd indeed. His neighbors find him troubling, and his moments of acting strangely make them sure that unclean spirits are in his soul troubling his mind.

His eyes are fixed on Jesus. He starts yelling at Jesus: “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.”

It's the unclean spirits speaking, they know.

Did you notice something? The spirit that possesses this man, that torments him, knows exactly who Jesus is. The rest of the crowd just think he's a particularly gifted itinerant rabbi. But the unclean spirit knows and names Jesus for who he is:

the Holy One of God, who can cast out unclean spirits like those that possess this man. And that unclean spirit cries out to Jesus because it doesn't want to be cast out. It doesn't want to be destroyed.

But Jesus knows how this man's life has been one of torment because of this spirit, and he orders it out. And with a last attempt at making his host miserable, the spirit comes out as the poor fellow has another seizure.

It's a beautiful thing, this healing of this tortured soul. One sentence drives out the unclean spirit. The very same spirit who knows exactly who Jesus is and what power Jesus has. And you'd think everyone would be dancing for joy, celebrating this healing.

They are amazed, of course. This is heavy-duty stuff, this healing. That combined with his skill in preaching and teaching leave them all somewhat shocked at what they have seen.

They say all the right things, of course: "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." Mark says that Jesus' fame spread. Of course it does. Something this shocking would be fodder for every tavern conversation, every traveling merchant's interaction in each town, women talking at the well after visiting their cousin in Capernaum. And as is so often the case when someone does something amazing, after the astonishment comes the doubt, and the wonderings:

- "was he able to do that because he's possessed by unclean spirits himself?"
- "was he in cahoots with that fellow who was so bad off, and paid him to act the way he did?"
- "was it some sort of magic trick?"

As if it is easier to believe some sort of conjuring than that the prophecies of the ages were being fulfilled.

It's a human reaction, this sense that we cannot trust our own experience, and that someone who does something beyond our understanding must really be trying to con us. And certainly there have been times where that has been true. But underlying a distrustful reaction is always fear: fear that this man cannot possibly

be who he is, fear that we will be disappointed yet again, fear that if he is who the unclean spirit said he is, he'll see our own unclean spirits within us, the ones that we've been trying so hard to keep under wraps.

Our passage from Mark stops with the people who have witnessed the event being amazed. There's something in the tone that suggests that they are awed. Remember that we talk about awe as something good, but also remember that "awe" can be something that is "awesome," or, in some frightened people – he cast out a unclean spirit that had possessed a man for as long as we knew him – it is "awful." Scary, like a horror film, because what happens next?

When people are afraid, they tend to misread the signs of what is going on, or to not trust what their own gut tells them: this Jesus, he's the real thing, and that's Good News, not scary news. But for some, such as the Pharisees and scribes who want to fix the practice of religion in a way that feels right to them rather than the way Jesus is doing it, it is awful, not awesome. So even in the earliest days of his ministry, seeds of doubt and distrust have already been sown, because when someone is in fear of losing power and authority and respect, they will be unable to tolerate it. What a deep, deep loss to those people. They might have learned and been delighted in what they learned. They might have partnered with Jesus rather than painting him as the enemy.

What do we take from this? First, the obvious: Jesus is exactly the person that that poor soul named: the Holy One of God. The one with the power to do unimaginable things. The teacher, the preacher, the healer, God. All of those things.

Second, that when we get into the habit of second-guessing what we sense to be true – "he couldn't possibly be those things!" – we miss out on the opportunity to be amazed, to be a part of a transformation of a broken world into something better, to be witness to soul-healing moments of all sorts.

But despite the fact that we might be afraid that he is in fact, all that; that he is in fact the very one our Heavenly Father promised us; it's time to simply say yes. If even unclean spirits can see him for who he is, shouldn't we as well?

Amen.