

February 2, 2015
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Mark 1:21-28

A New Authority

Earlier this week a huge snowstorm was forecast for the northeast. We have our own snowstorm forecast today, we'll see if we have the same experience as New York City, where people were cautioned, perhaps over-cautioned, about being snowed in: have food, have something to help fight isolation, have something to read. Perhaps the caution should be about what you read. Back in high school I read many of the numerous novels of Louis L'Amour, they were Westerns, and in at least one of them (they were kind of repetitive) a cowboy would get snowed in. Isolated and bored, prone to cabin fever, the only thing on hand to read was a medical textbook. By winter's end that cowboy would be sure he had leprosy, or was going through menopause.

We may laugh, but with access to the internet, we can be prone to that same sort of self-diagnoses, as we type into our search engines: "Why do I have this rash?" Or we can be like the high strung mother from a family TV sitcom. She watches her intense and intelligent daughter making repetitive twitches while doing her homework. The mother says, "She has OCD—those obsessive, repeated movements—OCD, I'm sure of it! I've read 20 articles about it online!"

Now I'm the first to admit that I turn to the internet when I have a question. I appreciate Web MD. Having access to the web's wealth of information, medical and otherwise, is a tremendous blessing. But I also think that the vast availability and accessibility of so much information can become an itch that you can't stop scratching. I think all that info can encourage a kind of thinking that is not all that healthy, can sometimes confer a self-proclaimed expertise that can even be dangerous. You keep reading those articles, thinking that's the medicine you need. At least, that's how it often is with me, and I don't think I'm alone. I think that itch for information is just a presenting symptom. Underneath it is a more significant, more serious condition, and it has to do not with information, but with authority.

Authority ties together the two stories in today's gospel. It begins with Jesus traveling to another town, stopping by the local synagogue. Nothing unusual about this, it was common for religious communities to have a guest teacher. What is unusual is the way Jesus teaches. With authority! There's a bit of a dig, here, in the way the gospel writer tells this story: He teaches, with authority—and not like the scribes. Intriguingly, we don't hear what Jesus teaches, just that the way he does so has an effect on those who gather. They are astounded, maybe affronted.

Authority comes up again as these people are gathered in the synagogue and then someone else comes in, someone unusual, someone acting strange, saying strange things. Maybe you've had an experience like this, you see someone acting, saying strange things. It can be offputting, even scary. We do hear what Jesus says in this scene. We hear Jesus say: "Be silent, and come out of him." Actually, I think a stronger translation is more appropriate here, Jesus says something more like, "Be quiet, and be gone." Or, even better, "Shut up, and leave."

Jesus speaks with that kind of intensity, with that kind of authority, not to a person, but to the thing that possess the person. Jesus speaks with power to an unclean spirit—which means what exactly? In other translations, and other places in the gospels—this kind of story is repeated—these unclean spirits are called demons. There are numerous stories in the New Testament of people talking or acting strangely, of people not being in full control of themselves or their bodies, of people being tormented by inner voices. In the ancient worldview, demons explained a lot of strange behavior.

We have a different understanding of behavior and causes today. Perhaps some of what the Bible describes as possession by unclean spirits we now describe in terms of chemical imbalances, or mental illnesses. We don't call them unclean spirits, but we do still live in a world which knows their effects. We don't call them demons, but they are just as devastating, and absolutely real. We see it on our streets—many of our homeless people struggle with these conditions, and so also our government and social service agencies struggle with how to care for them. We see it in our own families, as people we care for struggle with such illnesses, and as we struggle to care for them.

We see in ourselves, too. We may not have a clinical diagnosis, but is there a one of us who hasn't had that experience of not feeling fully in control of one's body? We know that thing is unhealthy, and still we reach for it. Maybe it's the snooze alarm, or the wrong food. Or it's the touch screen, that addictive checking, all that information, just at hand. I sometimes feel my eyes pulled to my phone, pulling me away from people, isolating me. Or there are other things we reach for, other addictions, that take control of our bodies...

We may not have a clinical diagnosis, but is there a one of us who has not at times been tormented by inner voices? Maybe you have felt your mind race with a jumble of words and thoughts. Late at night you lie in bed and you can't turn off the conversations, playing on an endless internal loop. Or maybe it's not just a night time thing, maybe you have gone about your day with a refrain in your head, a lack of self-confidence that's like a demonic hiss: "Who do you think you are? What do you think you have to do with that?"

Those voices, that unclean spirit, hissed at Jesus. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" It's an unusual, a strange, sentence, it's an idiomatic phrase. Translators don't quite know what to do with it. It has a sense of the demons saying: "Who do you think you are?" and "What's it to you?" and "Why are you upsetting things?" Jesus tells it: "Shut up and leave."

Jesus speaks with authority, and the unclean spirit shuts up a leaves. That's the power of the Word of God. Like a teacher who can harness an unruly class, with an authoritative presence and a pointed sentence, Jesus sends the demon reeling. Jesus asserts control, creates order out of chaos, with an authoritative and simple sentence, like the author of creation.

I find tremendous hope in this ordering, this authority of God over all powers of darkness. I find tremendous hope in God's power over all that would torment us, over all that makes us strange to one another and to ourselves. When modern life, with its uncertainty and anxiety and its overwhelming amounts of information, when modern life seems not just a sickness but a terminal illness, we have a God to whom we can turn, a God who tells demons what to do and where to go. We have a book that tells us of God's authoritative teaching and healing. We have a community with which we can gather, to hear this teaching, to witness this healing.

For that, too, is a condition of these stories. God's authority is revealed not in isolation, but in community, in the community that gathers on the Sabbath. It's as if the story is saying, that's where and you will see it, and receive it.

But be aware, the story also cautions, because God's authority will also disrupt that community. God's authority will upset things, as the demons well knew. The teaching to which we are accustomed, the accepted scripts taught by familiar scribes may fall by the way side, compared with God's new teaching. Be aware, the story also cautions, because the community into which God enters, the community in which God is found, will also be found by strange people, who will do and say strange things.

God reaches out to just those people, reaches out to what is unhealthy, and makes it whole. Just as God reached out to you, and me. In Christ, we are no longer strangers, we are all made clean, we are all given a new condition, through the authoritative, healing grace of God.