

February 28, 2024 - Epiphany 4

Prayer of the Day

Compassionate God, you gather the whole universe into your radiant presence and continually reveal your Son as our Saviour. Bring wholeness to all that is broken and speak truth to us in our confusion, that all creation will see and know your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

Christian Scripture - 1st Corinthians 8:1-13 (Verse 1b quoted here)

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus 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.

Sermon

If we are doing life "right," we are always learning. If we are *approaching* life "right," we will always be willing to admit that we have much more to learn.

And if we are *really* wise about all this, we will recognize that learning is more than just "acquiring more information." Much more.

This is the point that Paul makes in our reading from 1st Corinthians.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

Getting more "facts" in our brain is not necessarily a bad thing. But if they have no impact on our relationships with others, or worse, if we use them as a measure of our worth over others, we have already lost the game.

That's one of the things that makes Jesus' teaching in the synagogue so startling. He does much, much more than simply give the people more information. He teaches by modelling a way of relating to others, even those who might be difficult or challenging. And that is something we *all* can learn.

So let's take a look at this story of Jesus, the teacher, and "learn" a bit more about ourselves and our relationships with others.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught.

I visited Capernaum when I was on my study tour of Israel/Palestine a number of years ago. It was a fishing village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, with a population of about 1,500 in Jesus' day. Parts of this synagogue building are still there. The base of the original building was made of the same black, volcanic rock as almost everything else in town. Sometime later, after Jesus' day, the building was taken down and replaced by a new building made of carved white blocks of limestone, which had several white pillars as part of the design. Some of these walls and pillars are still there, and they stand out rather glaringly against the rough black background of all the other ruins in town. But if you go around to the sides of the synagogue ruins, you can see the original black foundation stones, still in their original location.

It gives us an idea of the space in which Jesus would have been teaching.

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Even in our day, if you are going to give a presentation, or if you are writing an article for a scholarly journal, they will want you to have footnotes. Lots and lots of footnotes! They will not only want to know that you have read up on your topic, they will also want to know what everyone else has said about your topic.

In this story today, Mark is suggesting that the usual practice for teachers in synagogues would have been very similar, and even expected. Mark says that teachers, scribes and other leaders in the Jewish community would quote other scholars in their teaching, almost implying that they had very little creative or original to say.

Now, Mark may have been exercising a bit of creative license here, in order to make his point. That needs to be acknowledged. But his point is that Jesus doesn't do it that way.

As you know, Mark's gospel, as is the case for almost all of the New Testament, was written in ancient Greek. The word that our translators have rendered teaching with "authority," can technically be translated as teaching "out of himself."

Mark's emphasis is that Jesus doesn't need to cite sources or other experts for his teaching. His teaching, his modelling, comes from within. And Mark says that it strikes Jesus' hearers as somehow more authentic, more connected to daily life than the ivory tower of scholastic thought. If nothing else, it's a bit jarring, and it sets the stage for what is to come.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

I was part of a Jewish-Christian study group when I was in Ontario, and we discussed this story in one of our sessions. The Jewish participants pointed out a few things which deepen this story for us.

The first is that the word Mark uses, which is translated "unclean," does **not** mean dirty, or evil, or abhorrent. There is no sense of moral failure attached to the word. It is a technical term which pertains to being rightly prepared to participate in religious rituals, primarily at the Jewish Temple. If you prepared a dead family member's body for burial, you were doing a perfectly good and holy thing. But you would then be considered **ritually** "unclean," and would need to perform certain rites to be understood a ritually "clean" again.

So, this "unclean spirit" in the synagogue does not need to be considered "evil." We don't need to be thinking of a little guy wearing a red body suit with horns on his head who is trying to possess or corrupt the unfortunate man in the synagogue!¹ It is simply unsuitable, or inappropriate at the present time.

The other thing that the Jewish folks said in our study group was that they were quite frankly puzzled by the term "unclean spirit." The word "unclean," in the Jewish tradition, is used when dealing with concrete, physical **things**, such as, as mentioned before, a dead body. "Spiritual" phenomena, such as angels or relationships, cannot be considered "unclean." They do not determine whether someone is "clean" with regard to purity laws, or participation in Temple services.

Which might mean that Mark was using terminology with which he was only vaguely familiar, or he may have had a different understanding which is not clear to us now.

But we get a hint of what Mark is trying to say in his next verse.

...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."

¹ Interestingly, in Luke's version of this story (4:31-37), the spirit is referred to as an "unclean demon." Since we are exploring Mark's version, we will follow his lead in this telling.

In Mark's story, Jesus does not want people to be labelling him. He doesn't want to be called by titles such as "messiah" or "son of God," at least until he has had a chance to show people who he is and how he's doing things. Scholars call this "Mark's messianic secret." Remember, Jesus is "teaching" the people, not by giving them more information, but by modelling a way of living which is intentional about "the reign of God."

This "unclean spirit," however, busts this secret wide open. He proclaims to the assembly that Jesus is, "the holy one of God."

Again, this wasn't "evil." In fact, as far as Mark was concerned, it was accurate! But for Mark's Jesus, this was inappropriate and detrimental to what Jesus was trying to do.

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

This is interesting, because Jesus does **not** destroy the unclean spirit (which is what the spirit almost seemed to be inviting Jesus to do!). He simply orders him out.

And again, he does this "out of himself." He doesn't say, "Come out in the name of God," or "The reign of God has no place for you, so it demands that you leave." He simply says, "Be silent, and come out."

Mark's Jesus teaches by example, relating to others, even adversaries, not by destruction, but by cleansing. Mark seems to be saying that Jesus makes this man in the synagogue "clean" by his word, and not by ritual action. This points the reader, and us, to who Jesus is, beyond our labels and titles.²

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

The spirit leaves. Not without grumbling! Not without complaining. But Jesus' authority is such that it cannot be resisted, even by such vaguely threatening and ambiguous things as "unclean spirits."

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."

The "teaching" hits home. Mark insists that the people are seeing something completely outside their previous experience. Jesus is not just passing on information. He has begun revealing who he is and how he will operate, outside of their labels, outside of their titles, and even outside their expectations. And by doing this "out of himself," he demonstrates that he, and by extension God, is free to bring healing and wholeness to all parts of the people's lives. And destruction does not even enter into the story.

At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

A clear demonstration that what the people in the synagogue witnessed was not just a dynamic speaker, or an educated instructor. They saw something outside their experience, outside their expectations, which was so shocking and so liberating that they could not help but tell others about it.

Now, we know how this works. In telling their versions of the story, they probably **would** have used labels and titles! But Mark is less concerned about that now, because what they saw will point people **beyond** their labels and titles, and direct them to the one who did this amazing thing, who lived what he was saying, and who manifested a way far different from what they were used to in their daily life living under the boot of the Roman empire.

Jesus taught them, not by filling their heads with new facts, but by modelling a new, and even revolutionary, way of being, in which power and "authority" is put at the service of healing and restoration.

² I recognize that Mark (1:1) begins his gospel by "labeling" Jesus for his readers, but he constructs his story around the Messianic Secret, and this story is part of that construction.

And Mark makes sure that we hear the same thing, just as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, just as the church has been called to proclaim for 2,000 years. It's not about knowledge, it's not about information, it's not about facts. It's not even about being right. It's about the love which God has for every atom of creation. It's about the love which God shares in unexpected places and ways, even in the face of vaguely threatening and ambiguous things like "unclean spirits." And it's about the call for *us* to live into this teaching, by sharing the liberating love of God wherever we are, wherever we go. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

A - Trusting the presence of God with all creation, we offer our prayers for the world God loves, the church God calls, and for all people according to their needs.

[Short pause]

A - Holy teacher, you invite us into the adventure of learning: learning life, learning ourselves, learning the reign of God. Help us be better students. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy instructor, remind us that learning is not just about accumulating information, but it is about becoming who and what we are *called* to be. Strengthen us to continue the journey. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy guide, you take us into challenging and sometimes uncomfortable places. Give us the faith to follow, and to be open to what we find. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy tutor, you are continually training your church, that we might be made new every day. Free us from old habits; open us to fresh insights, even if they come from unexpected directions. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy educator, you have prepared us for service to those in need. Make us willing to embrace the hurting with your love, especially those we name before you.

[Long pause]

God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy mentor, you accompany us on all of life's travels. Stimulate our curiosity. Inspire us to listen to different understandings. Help us be better students. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.