

Under Whose Authority

Mark 1:21-28
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First Presbyterian Church
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Some years ago, a young man who wanted to change his life went into a church and sat down in the sanctuary.... He took out a piece of paper and ... began writing down a long list of things that he promised he would do to change his life – a whole page of things. He signed his name at the bottom, ... placed it on the altar, and sat down again in the sanctuary.

As he was sitting there, ... he began to sense the voice of God.... And the more he listened to it, the more he heard God saying to him, “You’ve done it all wrong. I want you to go back up there and get the piece of paper and tear it up. And then I’ll give you another instruction.”

So, the young man ... walked up to the altar and did as the Lord told him. And then he went back to sit down (and wait) for the Lord to instruct him.

It did not happen immediately, but finally the message came through. The Lord said to him, very gently, “Now take a piece of paper ..., sign your name ... at the bottom, and let me fill in all the rest!”¹

The young man was asked to trust in God, to give God complete authority over his life – what to keep in and what to give up, what to nurture and what to turn away from.

Today’s New Testament lesson describes what it is to place our lives under the authority of God. Here we have a man possessed by an unclean or evil spirit. He comes into the synagogue where Jesus is teaching – where he’s giving instruction for how we should live our lives – and he’s threatened by Jesus’ teaching.

All the other people, says Mark, “were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” All the others were astounded. And maybe they, also, felt a little threatened.

I mean, Jesus came to disrupt the status quo, to change lives. And most people aren’t very comfortable having their lives changed, particularly by some outside influence, even if it is Jesus.

¹ From Barry P. Boulware, First United Methodist Church, Kansas City, Missouri, who got it from Norman Neaves, a colleague.

Take for example, the cartoon with two young boys at the library. One of them comments excitedly on all the great “how-to” books he’s finding. The other boy looks at him sarcastically, and says, “I’m looking for the ‘why-bother’ books.”

That’s kind of humorous, and it’s kind of challenging – challenging us to ask “why bother.” Why bother when it comes to making changes in our lives, working for change in our world, in our communities, even in our families. Why bother? It’s just so hard to make positive, lasting change, isn’t it?

Hard, yes, and essential, if we’re going to enjoy the blessings of God, become the people, the families, the communities, and the world God knows we can be – the people God is counting on us becoming!

Look folks, it’s up to us to make this world a better place, to make our households and friend-groups more peaceful and nurturing, to make our communities safer and more joyous. And scripture is here to help us.

For instance, when it came to the unclean spirit in the synagogue, Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And Mark tells us “the unclean spirit ... came out of him.”

Jesus spoke and the evil spirit obeyed, albeit not without a little fuss – “throwing (the man) into convulsions and crying with a loud voice.” That’s how it was back then when Jesus encountered an unclean spirit.

Today, with us, it’s different. Jesus comes to us and sees within us all kinds of unclean, unhelpful, even hurtful things – and we see them, too. And we wish it were as easy as Jesus standing before us saying, “Come out of him, you spirit of anger; Come out of her, you spirit of negativity; Come out of that family, you spirit bickering.” The list could go on and on.

Just to capture them all, let’s focus on the Seven Deadly sins – pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth, or laziness. I think we can all see ourselves as plagued by one or more or all of those “sins.” When looking at our lot in life; the things we wish were different; the attitudes, behaviors, addictions, temptations, choices and resignations that get in the way of us being a little better than we are right now and enjoying the blessings that come from that – when looking at all this, we see the unclean spirit within us.

If only Jesus would stand before us and command the negative attitude or behavior to leave us, and it would! If only it were that easy.

But it's not. Oh, Jesus does command it, Jesus' teachings are clear about it, about how we should act toward one another, how we should manage our lives. But sadly, we do not obey him. Sadly, our demons are free to menace us and haunt us and plague us and, too often, it feels that we have little if any control over it.

But there is hope. The unclean spirit in the synagogue obeyed Jesus because Jesus was stronger than the unclean spirit. Jesus had authority over the unclean spirit. There was no battle between the two of them – Jesus spoke and the fight was over.

With us it is different. God has given us the choice to live under the authority of the Lord or not. And while we as Christian do seek to live under the authority – or at least the influence – of Jesus, as I've said, too often our negative behaviors and choices are stronger.

Well, let me tell you, that's because you are battling those negative behaviors and choices all by yourself, or too much by yourself.

When we battle our negative attitudes and behaviors, our addictions and temptations, our bad choices and resignations all by ourselves, they become stronger.

But if we evoke the name of Jesus – the name and person and teachings of Jesus in standing against them – all those negative things don't stand a chance. In other words, the closer we get to Jesus, the stronger we get in our battle against all things evil. It's that simple, and that hard.

Remember, the man with the unclean spirit was thrown into convulsions before being freed. It is a struggle for us to grow in the faith, to become a better person, to give up the old self and clinging to our new selves in Christ. And on top of that, the joy and blessings that come from it, they're hard to see and imagine, and so we have to do it on faith.

And to do that, we have to rely on Jesus for inspiration and strength. We have to read about or ask someone to show us the promises in scripture. When dealing with a particularly difficult challenge, we have to look at and study what scripture says – and wrestle with it – if we're going to overcome the demons in our lives.

To give you a glimpse of what that might be like, consider the experience of author Kathleen Norris when she was trying to get a group of elementary-school children to change their behavior.

Norris used to play a game with them, making a deal with them. "First you get to make noise," she would say, "and then you'll make silence."

The time of noise was always predictably chaotic – shouting, pounding and stomping – like a football team exploding out of a locker room. But the period of silence that followed was unexpectedly passionate and creative.

When the children were asked to write about it, “their images often had a depth and maturity that was unlike anything else they wrote. One boy,” says Norris, “discovered that, ‘Silence is a tree spreading its branches to the sun’.”

One third-grader’s poem turned into a prayer: “Silence is spiders spinning their webs; it’s like a silkworm making its silk. Lord, help me to know when to be silent.”

Another little girl offered a gem of spiritual wisdom that Norris returns to ... when her life becomes too noisy and distracting: “Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go.”²

When we follow the command of Jesus to be silent – and turn to him for help in silencing our most troublesome, negative behaviors and attitudes – then it’s us spreading our branches to the sun and soaking up the light of God’s love, forgiveness, and peace.

When we hear God’s still, small voice, we are like silkworms spinning the silk of a sanctified life.

When we listen for the guidance of the Lord – really listen, instead of telling the Almighty all about what we are convinced we need to achieve – we rediscover that our most precious treasure is the God-breathed soul that each of us has from the very beginning of life, a soul that we really should remember to take with us into all the splendid surprises of each day.

It’s not easy to turn to Jesus and trust in him to rid us of our negative, hurtful, defeated selves. But it is a beautiful thing when we do, a beautiful way to live, a beautiful life that we are given as someone who truly turns to the Lord, and relies on him to shape our lives, your life. Amen.

² (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* [New York: Riverhead Books, 1998], 16-17).

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we are surprised, startled, and amazed that you created us to be your people. We are surprised that you have not rejected your people, despite our hard hearts and callus actions.

Thank you for loving us enough to challenge our false assumptions. Help us to see, once and for all, what it is you see: people cleansed and made holy by the love of Jesus Christ.

Gracious God, may we be daily surprised in your acts of love, your acts creation, your acts of renewal.

We pray your spirit of comfort upon those experiencing the final days of life, and your peace upon them and their families. We pray for those dealing with illness and disease. We pray for those in need of renewal and strength to meet their daily struggles. We pray all this confident in your ability to renew and strengthen us, and to guide us, as you did when giving us the Lord's Prayer to pray, as we do now, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.