

“What Have You to Do with Us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Mark 1:21-28

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I was teaching caregiving skills to Deacons at the church where I was on staff. This took place at another church. The topic was caring for parents who had suffered the loss of an infant due to miscarriage or stillbirth. I shared how the death of an infant differs from the death of others because the family also suffers the loss of dreams for that child – who that child will grow up to be and all the firsts such as first step, first word, 1st birthday, 1st day of school, etc.. My knowledge came from ministering to mothers/fathers who suffered loss through miscarriages or the death of their infant as chaplain for the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and the OB/GYN unit and from books on the experiences of others. One of the Deacons had lost a son at birth the previous year. Prior to the meeting, I had invited her to share her experience about what had or had not been helpful to her and her husband. She spoke about the anguish of losing their son, what was helpful, what was hurtful.

There was a huge difference in how she and I spoke that evening. She spoke with the authority of a grieving parent while I spoke as an observer of grieving parents. There is an authority that comes from personal experience.

In today's scripture, Jesus enters the synagogue, begins teaching and people notice he teaches as “one having authority, and not as the scribes.” The scribes, knowledgeable teachers in the Jewish community, were not slouches but their authority was no match for the Son of God. John's gospel tells us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him and without Him not one thing came into being.” The scribes knew scripture--God's written word--but Jesus was God's Living Word. Imagine the authority exuding from every pore of Jesus' being - the very Lord God present at creation, the One who had moved upon the face of the waters. There was no comparison between Jesus' authority and that of the Scribes!

Years later, Jesus said to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus spoke as one with authority because he knew God had granted him that authority.

Even a man with an unclean spirit recognized Jesus' authority. He interrupts Jesus shouting, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" We don't really know what Mark meant by an "unclean spirit." Who do you picture as a person with an unclean spirit? Someone that personifies evil like the Hannibal Lector character in "Silence of the Lambs?" Someone you would avoid on the street? I always interpreted the man with the "unclean spirit" as wandering in off the streets to heckle Jesus because, after all, no church-goer would ever, ever interrupt a teacher in the midst of teaching. I used to think that. . . .

In 1999, I had interviewed with a pastor search team and was candidating for the pastor position. For those not familiar with Presbyterian terminology that means you preach and lead worship at a "neutral pulpit" so the search team can experience you in action.

I was in the middle of my children's sermon, asking *the children* how to find God in the phone book when this man in the choir loft stands up and says, "I know the answer." He then proceeds to walk out of the choir loft, come to the front and take the phone book away from me proudly demonstrating that to find God in the phone book you only need look up their church's phone number. I was aghast! Outwardly, I was trying to be a non-anxious presence! Inwardly I was thinking, "Is this guy crazy? He's hijacking my children's sermon! This is my **one shot** with this search team – he can do this one of the other 51 Sundays of the year. How unbelievably rude! Does this ever happen to male clergy?"

I just could not believe this church-going choir member would behave that way!!!! It's still hard to believe. Was he possessed by God's Spirit or just full of himself? He was full of something! After he made his point, I proceeded to finish my children's sermon going in the direction I had in mind. And yes, I got the job.

Remembering that incident this past week put a completely different perspective on this passage. What *if* the unclean spirit interrupting Jesus was a regular at synagogue? What if **he was** a member of the choir? No offense choir members. Doesn't the scripture read differently if you consider the possibility the man with the unclean spirit was like any one of us attending church today?

Having an unclean spirit, or being "possessed" may not be as foreign to us as we care to admit. Truth be told, I have at times been possessed by anger at a family member or ex-spouse and said or done things I later regretted. Has that ever happened to you? Have

you ever been so possessed by envy or jealousy you behaved in a way you later regretted? Have you ever felt possessed by something that you know was not the Spirit of God? Can you honestly say you have never felt possessed by an “unclean spirit?” We may quickly acknowledge people are possessed by unclean spirits of pornography or gambling but what about the socially acceptable unclean spirits of workaholism or materialism in our society?

“Be silent, and come out of him!” Jesus says to the unclean spirit. The man convulses, cries out and immediately the unclean spirit leaves.

Mark has not told us a single thing Jesus taught but he has shown Jesus had power over unclean spirits. Jesus-- possessed with the will and purposes of God--fights the purposes of evil in that man's unclean spirit. The battle is fought right in the midst of church folk like us. In other words, the battle of good versus evil, right versus wrong, life versus death happens not just on a cosmic level but right here in the midst of us who are gathered for worship. Each one of us is “possessed” in some way which keeps us from enjoying life and each other in the way God intends. We ask, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth” fearful of that within us that needs to be evicted. For don't we live with the internal struggle of resisting or trusting God's intent for our lives?

The Good News is that Jesus is still in the business of freeing people from unclean spirits. Jesus continually works to free us from that which keeps us in bondage, that which threatens our being who God intends us to be or defeats our best and highest purposes. Jesus Christ stands ready to break the power of sin in our lives granting us abundant life.

I worked with a student chaplain years ago who possessed wonderful gifts for ministry. He also possessed a history of physical abuse from his father. As a child he had decided he did not want his children to fear him the way he feared his father. He was determined the cycle of abuse would stop with him. He possessed great self-awareness of the things that triggered his anger and diligently worked not to give in to anger that possessed him in the moment. He learned to walk away from his children when out of patience, asking his wife to intervene until he gained self-control. He learned to deal with his anger before it got out of control. He asked God everyday to help him be the father God intended him to be. He had asked the question, “What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth?” and

knew for his life it meant stopping the cycle of abuse. It was a lengthy, intentional process for him. . . . Some people have dramatic, immediate experiences of being released from an unclean spirit while for others, the road to healing takes time and on-going support. The Good News is that Jesus Christ continues to help people defeat the powers that constrict or enslave.

At a Martin Luther King breakfast run by a Community Center, a high school student spoke about receiving the annual award for his paper about Dr. Martin Luther King. When he received the award he said, "At first, I was very excited about getting this honor. I knew how proud it would make my family and my church and it was a great feeling of accomplishment. To better understand the meaning of the award, I began reading the works of Dr. King. I was humbled, and I realized that this award called me to engage in the struggle that he gave his life for, and I can only hope I'm worthy to the task." That young man had asked the question, "What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth?" He realized that life is more than honors, fame and awards. He realized the purpose of life is to engage in the urgent struggle to live out God's will and purposes not just for himself but for all of God's children.

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? What have you to do with me? Our lives demonstrate our answer. Amen.