

Message: Jesus Restores Us with Authority

Do you have a problem with authority?

N.T. Wright tells a story about a party.¹ A young man had a number of friends who all came to visit one evening. As is often the case, there was music playing, the crowd was happy and things just seemed to escalate a little bit at a time until there was a sudden knock at the door. Someone opened the door and a policeman came into the room. The officer went over to the stereo and turned it off, getting everyone’s attention. The officer then asked this question: “who’s in charge?”

No one answered. The officer asked again, “who’s in charge?” The young man said, “Well, it’s my place, so I guess I’m in charge.” The police officer said, “No, I’m in charge now. This party’s over. Go home.” And what he said was true. The party was over and everyone went home.

The people at the party were happy with their situation, never realizing they had gone outside the bounds. It took someone new on the scene, someone who spoke with authority, to make them realize their error and to change the course they were on.

In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus is the new authority. He is like the policeman, telling the people of Israel that there was a new sheriff in town. It was time to turn away from their error and to embrace God and the good news of the kingdom of God and be restored.

We do have problems with authority, don’t we? Some of us dislike authority more than others. We prefer to do things our own way. We don’t like reporting to other people, being told what to do or even following directions. We prefer to figure things out on our own. We like to work when, where and the way we want without the interference of someone else looking over our shoulder.

When it comes to obeying God where does that leave us? Jesus isn’t really a policeman. The party analogy breaks down when it comes to God. Romans 1:18 offers a clue, “*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their*

¹ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox, 2004

wickedness suppress the truth.” The truth of the matter is we want to be in control. We want to call the shots. We love the praise and recognition that goes along with being the top dog. Female or male, we like having our own way, even when it comes to our relationship with God. So we do our best to try to manipulate our relationship with God and with others. Unfortunately, when we do, we end up not only lying to other people, we end up lying to ourselves and then we try to pass those self-serving lies off to God. Good luck with that!

The Scripture reading from Mark 1:21-28 reveals Jesus’ authority and power to us in an important way. Mark narrates the story to help us understand just who Jesus is and why we need to follow him, without question. As we look deeper into our text for today, I want to focus on two, key points: first, let’s consider the nature of demonic possession, and second, let’s look at Jesus in action.

First, what was the man’s ailment? Mark 1:23 tells us a strange thing: as Jesus was preaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, a “*man with an unclean spirit*” interrupted him. Mark uses “unclean spirit” and “demon” almost interchangeably which most likely means possession by a fallen angel or a spiritual power. The unclean spirit had clearly taken control of the man as it used him to speak to Jesus. This must have been a shock to the other members of the assembly. It would be just like someone standing up – right now! – interrupting the sermon and challenging the reason for preaching this morning.

There is no indication the man was suffering in any way. He was sitting in the synagogue and was probably known. Synagogue leaders check you out pretty well and it was a small village. There is no indication of any overt manifestation of demonic possession. He wasn’t acting like Linda Blair’s character in the movie *The Exorcist*. The same is true today, no matter how Hollywood may dramatize different phenomena. Uncleanness can enter an assembly and live within it without revealing itself in an overt way. It’s important for our congregation and all Christian assemblies to be discerning and to embrace the light of the Holy Spirit, so there is no room for darkness to catch hold and grow.

A question we need to touch on briefly is this: what is the relationship between mental health and possession by an unclean spirit? Are schizophrenia, depression, bipolar illness and other mental health challenges caused by demon possession? I believe the answer is yes and no. Yes, I believe possession by a demon can cause mental health issues. Mark 5:1-20 narrates Jesus’ encounter with Legion. The demons’ host was clearly suffering and out of his mind. However, in my reading, I am led to believe there is an important difference between this man’s possession and mental illness.

In Jesus’ encounter with the demon possessed man in Mark 1:21-28, the unclean spirit knows who Jesus is and what Jesus has come to do. The demon initiates the conflict in a defensive way and resists Jesus. The demon calls Jesus “the Holy One of God,” a clear recognition of Jesus not only as human, the “Nazarene,” but as the divine Son of God. In contrast, people who come to Jesus who are ill call Jesus teacher, son of David, master or Lord, recognizing his humanity. If the man was mentally ill, I believe he would have called Jesus by a different title. However, as one who was possessed by an unclean spirit, the demon spoke in a way that revealed exactly who Jesus is.

I believe there are forms of mental illness where demonic possession is the cause, the person’s brain is overwhelmed by the unclean spirit. However, I believe there are many instances where mental illness is the result of natural causes. Jesus came to liberate us from the power of demons and to heal us from our illnesses, including mental illness. The end result is the same in both cases: the individual is restored, their family is restored and their community of faith is restored. Do we battle with unclean spirits? Yes.

What can we do if we feel unwell mentally and emotionally? Turn to Jesus and call on others who can help, particularly trained Christian professionals.

There is another line of thought as regards the unclean spirit in the synagogue that I will briefly mention. Ephesians 6:12 tells us what we are up against, *“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the*

heavenly places.” The demon in the synagogue might represent the spirit of the institution itself – the synagogue itself is under the influence of a dark power. Walter Wink writes about these powers in today’s world. When we think of the nature and value statements of different corporations or organizations, some are light and uplifting while others are dark and depressing. We think of the church as an organization of light, while we think of the IRS or, perhaps, companies that make pornographic movies as organizations of darkness. These are spiritual forces that seek to influence and capture our mind and heart today.

The second, and most important, point of Mark 1:21-28 is the **demonstration of Jesus’ authority with power**. This is Jesus in action! There is no indication that the content of Jesus’ message was particularly important – it isn’t recorded. And there is no indication that the style of his presentation was significant – we don’t know what it was. What is important is the manner of Jesus’ teaching – it was authoritative and it was demonstrated in a powerful way.

Jesus’ teaching amazed and overwhelmed everyone who heard it. We know he was gentle, even his words to the demon are gentle, though imperative. They are words of authority, spoken simply, yet with power and assurance. With seven words, Jesus silenced the demon and freed the man from possession. And, by doing so, Jesus not only liberated the man from the spiritual forces of oppression, he liberated the synagogue and began the process that would free the nation of Israel.

The demon came out of the man with a shriek, a loud shout or a cry, depending on which translation you read. That shriek must have startled everyone who was in the synagogue. The shriek was the exclamation point on the demonstration of Jesus’ power which he used with the authority given to him by God the Creator. The unclean spirit in the man had no chance against the pure and powerful Holy Spirit that filled Jesus, even though the demon wanted to fight.

Jesus’ battle with the dark, spiritual forces began in earnest that day in Capernaum. That battle would be fought in many other places, leading to a hill outside the city of Jerusalem and a cross placed on top of that hill. As Jesus hung on that cross, bleeding and gasping for breath, the

spiritual forces of darkness gathered around, shrieking and challenging Jesus through the voices of those who jeered at him and humiliated him as he hung there. The spiritual forces of darkness thought they had won that day, but Jesus took everything they had to give, even to the point of death on that cross and burial. And Jesus overcame, tearing open the very gates of hell and winning the victory for all of eternity through his resurrection and ascension. Halleluia!

We are immersed in a world that is filled with different forces and powers, some for good and some for evil. We live in a world where the church, the source of God’s grace for the world, leads to death instead of life in some ways and places. Our only hope is to stand firm in our belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Jesus is the way. We are called to be more than followers, students and supporters. We are called to commit ourselves to Jesus. We are called to build a church where God’s grace leads to life. When we do, when we fully and truly commit our lives to Jesus, our hearts are changed and our minds transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit working inside us. And nothing in heaven or on earth can withstand the power of God.

If you want to be freed from the spiritual forces of darkness, I invite you to pray with me now, *“Oh God, I need to be reminded when I feel so absolutely alone that you know my pain, you know my weakness. When I come to the end of words, when my mind is full of confusion, help me to remember that you pray for me. When I am overwhelmed with despair, when I want to give up, when I want to run away in fear, it is only your presence, gentle, powerful Friend, that gives me hope and strength. I need your help today. You are my Lord. Save me, help me and restore me. Amen.”*²

² Dale & Anita Ryan, <http://www.nacronline.com/>, January 31, 2015

Psalm 111 (NRSV)

Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

Mark 1:21-28 (NRSV)

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