

Epiphany 4B 2021 Sermon

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his disciples 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.

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

It's a strange thing to say, if you think about it. For, it is the **scribes** who were *recognized* by the Jews of Jesus' day as the authoritative teachers of the Jewish Law and customs.¹ *Jesus*, on the other hand, held **no** official position whatsoever in the Jewish religious system; within that system, he had no authority at all. He had no title, no degree, no imprimatur, no certification by the Jewish religious establishment that his teaching could be trusted. And yet, as we see in today's Gospel, **Jesus'** teaching has a power, an *inner* authority behind it, which the teaching of the scribes, the **official** authorities, does *not* have.

We might say that the scribes have *institutional* authority, that comes from their recognized position in the Jewish institutional hierarchy; whereas Jesus has *spiritual* authority that comes from within, from his spirit's oneness with God's Spirit.

Now, there's certainly nothing wrong with institutional authority, as far as it goes; it's probably necessary for our society to function. We elect our leaders – our governmental leaders, and our church leaders (as we will do today at our Annual Parish Meeting) – and our electing them confers on them the institutional authority to act and make decisions on our behalf. But the fact that someone occupies a recognized institutional office does not guarantee that they will be honest or truthful, or that they really care about the people whom they were elected to serve. It is easy for politicians, for instance, to become more focused on their own re-election, or voting the "party line," than on what is best for the people whom they were elected to serve. Jesus will later scold some of the religious authorities of his day, saying, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." (Matthew 23:25, NRSV)

I think **this** is what the people in the synagogue recognize in Jesus: The inside of his cup is clean – his spirit is clean. (see Matt. 5:8)

And when Jesus meets a man possessed by an **unclean** spirit, we *know* there will be a confrontation. The **unclean** spirit recognizes the clean spirit of Jesus (spirit recognizes spirit), and cries 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.”

Now, this is the very **first** act of Jesus’ ministry in Mark’s Gospel: casting out an unclean spirit. And, as Professor David Lose notes, “‘first things’ tend to set the tone for much of what is to come.” Biblical scholars have said that in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is the new Moses (see Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount); in Luke’s Gospel, he is a prophet (see Luke Timothy Johnson); and in Mark’s Gospel, he is the one with the power to overcome unclean spirits.

Now, perhaps it would be good to stop here, for a moment, and say something about “unclean spirits.” We, in our scientific and rational age, can sometimes struggle with those accounts in the Gospels when we are told that someone is possessed by unclean spirits or demons. It all seems so archaic, naïve, or superstitious.

And yet, my friends, with all that has been happening in our world this past year, I’m beginning to think that perhaps “unclean spirit” is a good way to talk about it all. We have had the demon of the coronavirus; historic wildfires and hurricanes; the graphic killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other black citizens by police, and the subsequent protests; the efforts to nullify elections, with no evidence presented. Again and again this past year, the evidence of science has been pushed aside in favor of more politically advantageous messaging. The Director of the Fremont County Department of Health and the Environment resigned and moved out of state because she and her family were receiving death threats – simply because she was doing her job, following the directives she received to protect the citizens of our County from COVID-19. (Now, if those death threats weren’t demonic, I don’t know what is.) Incredible conspiracy theories have drawn an amazing amount of support in our nation; a member of Congress has even supported statements that the mass shootings of children at Sandy Hook Elementary School and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School were staged, and the attacks on the World Trade Center Buildings on 9/11 were a hoax.² And then, of course, we witnessed, earlier this month, the deadly insurrection at our Capitol building – something that previously had been, at least in my mind, unimaginable.

A few days ago, Professor and Pastor Dr. James C. Howell wrote, “[C]an’t we see this through the biblical lens, that it’s not just one bad decision and then another, or stupidity, but actual vile forces that would undo us all? I used to worry people

would think I was crazy if I mentioned evil forces; but nowadays people nod. It's really the only thing that makes sense..."³ (unquote)

And, my friends, I have to agree. There is an unclean spirit at large in our land; and we need to deal with. Efforts to cast blame in one direction or another are not only futile; they actually **feed** the unclean spirit of division and partisanship, and they deflect us from directing our energies to remedy the situation that exists. The question is: What do we do about it, as members of the Body of Christ? What do we do about this unclean spirit at large in our land?

Today's Gospel gives us some suggestions.

First, Jesus says to the unclean spirit, "Be silent." And that, I think, is a good place for us to start. Our world is such a confusing cacophony, sound and fury, people engaged in an incessant war of words: insults, obfuscations, manipulations, misdirection, threats, all to their own benefit and that of their own group, without ever *stopping* to consider what is the mind of Christ, what is best for the **whole**, and not just my part. *Be silent*. Turn off the cacophony ceaselessly pouring fourth from the television and other news media, which in turn sets up endless conversations within our own minds. *Be silent*, and listen to what our body is saying to us. Pay attention to the feelings we harbor in our very cells: anger, resentment, self-righteousness, fear, defensiveness, vindictiveness, all resulting in a constant level of tension. We need to at least *start* letting go of these things, if the unclean spirit in our land is ever to loosen its hold on us, ever to depart from us. "Be still, and know that **I** am God," God instructs us in Psalm 46.

And, in another Psalm (Psalm 51, which we will hear on Ash Wednesday), we pray, "Create in me a **clean** heart, O God, and renew a **right** spirit within me." A clean heart; a right spirit. My friends, **this** is the best way to counter the unclean spirit at large in our land. As Richard Rohr has often said, "The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better."³ And, talking about how to deal with an unclean spirit, John Shea says, "bring your own stronger purity to it and cleanse it."⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. said something similar, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."⁵

And I think that brings us back to where we began: "...he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." It's *inner* authority that's being talked about here. The people in that synagogue felt it emanating from Jesus. It is the authority which comes from authenticity, Truth, compassion, humility, and divine love; and it has the power to drive out all that does **not** come from authenticity, Truth, compassion, humility, and divine love.

Jesus had no outer authority to order the Roman government out of Israel, though that's what many of his followers thought the Messiah would do – forcibly, if

necessary. But the **true** Messiah was not about *outer* authority. Jesus knew that the only real and lasting change must come from within.

So, let our prayer be that of the Psalmist: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within us.” **This** is how we drive out the unclean spirit at large, at loose, in our land.

AMEN

1 *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, David Freedman, ed., New York: Doubleday, 1992, “Scribes: New Testament,” p. 1015

2 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/us/politics/marjorie-taylor-green-republicans.html>

3 <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9999348-the-best-criticism-of-the-bad-is-the-practice-of>

4 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 49

5 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, 1963