

Sermon – “What Have You to Do With Us?”
Sunday, January 28, 2018
Scripture Readings: Mark 1:21-28 and Mark 5:1-20
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Our first reading comes from the first chapter of the Gospel According to Mark, right near the very beginning of the story. This episode immediately follows Jesus calling his disciples to come and follow him. Listen to God’s word to you from Mark 1, verses 21 through 28.

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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Our second reading also comes to us from Mark’s Gospel, only a few chapters later, in a moment where Jesus is visiting a gentile place and encounters something similar to what we heard of in the first reading. Listen for the Word of the Lord to you, from Mark chapter 5, verses 1 through 20.

¹ They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. ² And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³ He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; ⁴ for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷ and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” ⁸ For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” ⁹ Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” ¹⁰ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹ Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹² and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” ¹³ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

¹⁴ The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵ They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷ Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. ¹⁸ As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹ But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

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Depending on whether you count the 40-day temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness, Mark mentions demons at least seven times in the first five chapters of his Gospel.¹

We heard a few minutes ago the story from the synagogue where he encountered a man with an unclean spirit. That was right in chapter one. Only a couple of sentences later, Jesus is found curing diseases and casting out more demons from all over the city. Another paragraph beyond that, and he is doing the same throughout the whole region. Several more times we encounter Jesus and his disciples doing this, until in chapter 5—still early in Mark—we find the story we just heard, of this wild man, living across the sea in the tombs, unrestrainable, howling and bruising himself with stones, until the day Jesus comes ashore.

Several elements of these stories are immediately noticeable; Mark is making a few things abundantly clear from the start. People may be confused about who Jesus is, but the spirits know exactly who he is. We still have several entire chapters to go before Jesus asks even his own disciples, “Who do you say I am,”² but these unclean spirits are full of awareness and alarm from the moment he appears. The two we heard just now react almost identically.

The first, confronted in a holy place of Jewish worship, 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.”³

The second, encountered in the wild, coming from the tombs in a gentile land, shouts loudly, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.”⁴

¹ See Mark 1:12-13 (Jesus in the wilderness tempted by Satan), Mark 1:23-28 (Jesus casting out an “unclean spirit”), Mark 1:32-34 (Jesus casting out many demons), Mark 1:35-39 (Jesus casting out demons throughout Galilee), Mark 3:14-15 (Jesus appointing apostles and giving them authority to cast out demons), Mark 3:20-30 (Jesus accused of casting out demons by the power of the ruler of the demons), and Mark 5:1-20 (Jesus healing a man with a legion of demons). Additionally, Mark 3:7-12 has “unclean spirits” falling down before him declaring him to be the Son of God and Jesus ordering them not to make him known, and Mark 4:2-20 speaks of Satan pulling people away from the word.

² See Mark 8:27-30.

³ Mark 1:24 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

⁴ Mark 5:7 (*NRSV*).

Both instantly recognize three things that are made known to anyone who hears them, or who reads Mark's account: One is the identity of Jesus. Mark announces this to us without hesitation, repeatedly, from the beginning. It is no mystery to be slowly comprehended as we encounter discreet hints; it is no big revelation offered at the end of the story; no, in Mark's narrative Jesus the Son of God emerges boldly and immediately upon the scene.

The second recognition these unclean spirits make is the authority of Jesus. While all the people may be showing up curious to see what Jesus can do, amazed to learn by watching that Jesus teaches, and then acts, as one with authority; the demons know from the instant they see him that he has the authority to command and it will be so. Specifically, they recognize that he has the power to do as he pleases with unclean spirits, which connects to their third recognition.

Along with the identity of Jesus and the authority of Jesus, the demons in both of these stories recognize the *threat* Jesus poses to the evils of the world. Hence their worry: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" People may have confusion; in fact, in an episode that lies between these stories, some argue that Jesus is casting out demons by the power of the ruler of the demons,⁵ but the demons themselves know they and Jesus are on opposite sides, and they fear what he will do with them.

Now surely the Gospel writer introduces all of this so straightforwardly in large part to give the same clarity to us, the Gospel readers. From the beginning, Mark wants us to know who Jesus is and the kind of authority Jesus wields.

But I think he wants something else, too. The very first words of Mark are, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."⁶ It is about Jesus Christ, identified as Son of God, and it is about good news. It is exactly those two things found here in today's scripture. Our second reading ends with Jesus telling this man, now cured and in his right mind, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you. And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed."⁷

In other words, at Jesus's command he is spreading a personal story, not merely one of something that had been *done*, but of something that had been done *for him*. Which should make us go back and re-examine our own experience of the story. Especially since the story involves evil spirits, which modern people like us find to be alien curiosities, we probably find ourselves inclined to hear these exorcism stories and identify with some anonymous onlooker to the proceedings. But if the story which needed to be spread to everyone was the story of what Jesus "had done *for him*," (emphasis mine) then the takeaway is what Jesus can do *for us*, which is to say, we ought to identify with the demoniac, not some neutral figure standing to the side.

⁵ See Mark 3:20-30.

⁶ Mark 1:1 (NRSV).

⁷ Mark 5:19-20 (NRSV).

What does it mean to hear this story as the man inhabited by a legion of unclean spirits? Let's take a little bit of a roundabout journey to see if we can find our way there.

There is a sort of proverb that gets tossed around sometimes which goes like this: "Hate the sin; love the sinner." It is a saying which has gotten kind of a bad reputation of late, and not entirely for no reason, because in this, as in many things we learn in the Church, we Christians often pay very little heed to the actual content of the words that come out of our mouths; or, more accurately, we love to focus in on just one small bit of it and ignore the rest. What has happened is that a number of people have gone around reciting those words, meanwhile living in such a way that nobody doubts in the slightest their dedication to the hating of sin, but their loving of sinners is left an open question. Add to that the tendency for people to define the sins that need hating in a way that is very convenient to themselves and their own hang-ups, and you get an ugly mess. You get widespread distaste for any talk that sounds like that, and for the church as a whole, for that matter.

But that is very sad, because the idea of hating sin while loving the sinner is really quite incredible, and the idea that God would do such a thing is fantastic good news.

Perhaps you are ready to object. Why would it be good news for God to hate our sin? Well, don't *you* hate your own sin? Think back to something you have messed up very badly in your life. Do you wish to be more like that, or less? Does someone who loves you, who is rooting for you in life, wish you to be better or worse? Does not love involve hoping for someone to be their best self, and hoping for an end to anything which makes that person less than they could be? Loving a sinner is not merely compatible with hating his or her sin; it *requires* it.

Anyone who has ever loved an alcoholic spouse or family member knows exactly what it means to hate the sin, hate it intensely, while loving the sinner just as intensely. You see a person's life getting torn down, relationships being broken, the beauty in this person replaced by anger, depression, dishonesty. You hate what damages the persons you love. If you do not, you don't really love them.

I think people who have spent time in Alcoholics Anonymous or an organization like it are, in some ways, a step ahead of the rest of us in understanding life altogether. They have spent time, work, tears, and prayers wrestling with the opaque combination of forces within us and individual choice that make up patterns of sin and destruction. They've come to terms with the truths of both powerlessness over one's failures—the way in which they are caught up in disease—and personal ownership of those failures—the way in which they are guilty of sin that needs repenting and forgiveness.

For what we struggle with as human beings is both powerlessness *and* personal choices, and not just in addiction, either, but in all of sin. Our Reformed theology can help us here; our predecessors in the faith came up with oft-misunderstood phrases such as "total depravity," which is not about us being the most awful creatures possible, but about us being perfused with sin like a glass of water with a drop of ink, in such a way that nothing within us, not even the

best within us, is altogether untouched by it, and being cleansed of it can only come at the grace of a higher power. The Reformers contrasted this to a theology that regards us as fully free to do good or sin as we please, which addicts know better than the rest of us is not true. As I have said, I think they are a step ahead of others of us in understanding our true relationship to God as the one who breaks the bonds of sins from which we cannot free ourselves.

Alcoholics Anonymous is right when they teach about powerlessness, and about denial, and about the need for a higher power to even properly begin the work of change, apology, repentance, and freedom; but they aren't just right about alcoholism; this is a model of *everyone's* state of being. We are owned by endless numbers of things. Not just drugs, or other substances, but...the need to have the last word. The need to be right. The inability to back down. The need to put someone else down and lift ourselves up. The need to control everything. The need to stay out of things that are hard. The need to avoid pain. The need to look good. The need to feel good in the moment. The need to cling to things for ourselves. The internal forces which buffet and take control of our decisions in every moment of life are beyond our acknowledgement or even clear recognition.

But God hates that which pulls us down, and God hates that by which we pull each other down and wander away from God. This is good news. God hates the self-destructive things in which we are entangled. This is good news. The Gospel is good news because it announces God has separated sin from sinner. Our sin being attacked and defeated is rescue to us; we will no longer fall under its weight or be consumed with it but be lifted up in Christ. We each have our demons, whether literal or otherwise, and we saw what Christ does for those inhabited by demons.

So the man with an unclean spirit is not someone else; it is us. It is we who wander in the tombs, bruising ourselves with rocks, and it is we who shall be sitting at the feet of Christ one day, clothed and in our right minds.

The stories of demon possession in the New Testament are partly meant, it seems, to give us demonstration of Christ's supernatural identity and authority. But this is not just for awareness purposes; they are also there to give us *hope* in his identity and authority.

They show us Jesus was not here just to teach us how to live rightly, as we sometimes imagine. Though he surely did teach us that, and it was important, a man compelled by an unclean spirit does not find his way to salvation just from moral teaching, and neither do we. Nor was Jesus here just to free us from the consequences of sin, although he did that, too; but again, a man owned by sin does not need only to be pardoned from punishment, but to be set free from the sin itself, and like him, so do we. These stories show us a comprehensive truth: that Jesus has authority over all the things which have their grip on us, and that he uses it with mercy, and with love. What has Jesus to do with *us*? Whatever you may believe yourself to be stuck in, fear yourself to be unable to escape from, or know yourself to be caught by and held fast, Jesus Christ has the power to break you free.

Glory and praise to God; amen.