Mark 1:21-28

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

You Are Authorized by Jesus

The keyword today is “authority.” Jesus enters a synagogue and starts teaching, and the congregation is amazed that he teaches with *authority.* He orders an unclean spirit to leave a man, and he speaks with *authority.* The unclean spirit screams out, but leaves the man, confirming Jesus’ *authority.* Ironically, it is religious *authorities* who feel most threatened by Jesus’ *authority.*

We all have some issues with authority. When I was in high school, there were teachers that I treated with disrespect, not recognizing their authority. I think I was getting old enough to recognize that many adults – my parents, teachers, pastors, and even the President of the United States (who happened to be Richard Nixon) – were seriously flawed, and I began to rebel against authority. “Who are *they* to be telling *me* what to do?” Every time we hold elections for legislators and Presidents, we have to ask ourselves, “Am I willing to give this person authority?” We elect people who make laws and policies and decisions that can seriously impact our lives, and we not always comfortable giving these people such authority. We’re not always comfortable with the authority they exercise.

This must have been an issue for many Jews in Jesus’ day. The nation had been conquered, its temple destroyed, and its people enslaved. There were family struggles to gain power, and many people were displeased with the current king. The scribes, who would teach the Law to the people, must have been unable or unwilling to interpret the law satisfactorily. Then along came Jesus, who must have made everyone’s jaw drop. No ambiguity, no uncertainty, no flip-flopping. Here was a man who spoke with authority. Here was a man who spoke as if God was speaking through him. Here was a man who *commanded* spirits as God commanded the universe into existence. Here was a breath of fresh air.

But what was it he was teaching with such authority? Why does Mark omit these details? Mark has taken us from Jesus’ baptism, to the wilderness, to the advent of his ministry, to the calling of his disciples in a dozen verses. The only words we’ve heard Jesus are “follow me” and “the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and hear the good news,” so it is likely that Jesus’ teaching had something to do with discipleship, repentance, the kingdom, or good news.

So perhaps it would be a more fruitful endeavor to look at what happens with the man and the unclean spirit. While we are amazed at the power Jesus seems to hold over unclean spirits, what is more amazing is how he ministers to the poor man who is possessed by the spirit, particularly as it is contrasted to the modus operandi of the scribes and other “authorities.” In Jewish culture, cleanliness was godliness, and uncleanliness resulted in exile. The Law required that anyone who was unclean live outside the community until they had been cleansed. Many lived their (often short) lives isolated from the community, alone and cursed. Five chapters into Mark’s gospel we meet another man with unclean spirits who is chained down among the tombs, probably cared for the same way as an animal. Had Jesus not been lingering in the synagogue, the tormented man would likely have been bound and carried out of town, to be abandoned and forever avoided. But Jesus, the great healer, is able to distinguish the man from the malady, and is able to expunge the unclean spirit from the man, thus fully restoring him to the community. The healing is twofold: the man is restored to the condition of wholeness, as God intended him to be, *and* the man is restored to the community, thus able to enjoy the benefits of social interaction and a full life. These two aspects of Jesus’ healing correspond to the two greatest commandments according to Jesus: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. One must be wholly healthy, physically and spiritually to be able to most completely love God, and one must be in community to have neighbors to love (as well as to be loved).

Jesus practices what he preaches and teaches. The Kingdom of God is about dwelling in perfect harmony with God and with one another. Yet one can only live in such perfect harmony when one is cleansed of sin (which is, after all, transgression against God and neighbor). Jesus has come to restore the harmony that God created and exercises his authority to accomplish this.

But there’s more. This whole drama, the authoritative teaching and the exorcism, have also served to train the disciples. They have witnessed everything that Jesus had done, and later, in the sixth chapter of Mark, he will send his disciples out to cleanse others of unclean spirits. And the disciples are instructed to make more disciples, who make more disciples, who make more disciples…well, you see where this is going.

You and I, as living disciples of Jesus Christ, are *authorized* to cast out unclean spirits. They may not appear to us in quite so dramatic a fashion as we find in today’s lesson – I’ve never seen evil manifest itself in such an overt way. But evil is around us, and manifests itself in more subtle, more horrifying ways. Genocide, all manner of abuse, torture, deception, theft, neglect are all manifestations of evil, and Jesus has authorized us to confront it and eradicate it. Not in a manner that allows the ends to justify the means; every human being is loved by God and thus deserves our love as well. And while we have been authorized to cast out unclean spirits, we must nonetheless recognize that the ultimate authority comes from Jesus. Think of yourself as Jesus’ ambassador. You represent him, but you are not him. Any power and authority that you have is given by him.

This week, be bold. Accept that you are authorized by your Master to build God’s kingdom, to remove the unclean and the evil and restore the good. You can correct others in a spirit of love. You can even get angry – I seem to recall a certain carpenter who knocked over some tables once. Act boldly and with authority, Christ’s authority.