

Sunday, January 28, 2024
Deut. 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28
"What is This?"

The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

I start with a story: A DEA officer stopped at a ranch in Texas and spoke with the old rancher. He told the rancher, "I need to inspect your ranch for illegally grown drugs." The rancher said, "Okay, but don't go in that field over there.....", as he pointed out the location.

The DEA officer verbally exploded saying, "Mister, I have the authority of the Federal Government with me!" Reaching into his rear pants pocket, he removed his badge and proudly displayed it to the rancher. "See this badge?! This badge means I have the authority to go wherever I wish.... On any land!! No questions asked or answers given!! Have I made myself clear.....do you understand ?!!"

The rancher nodded politely, apologized, and went about his chores.

A short time later, the old rancher heard loud screams, looked up, and saw the DEA officer running for his life, being chased by the rancher's big huge Santa Gertrudis bull.....With every step the bull was gaining ground on the officer, the officer was clearly terrified as he tried to reach safety.

The rancher threw down his tools, ran to the fence and yelled at the top of his lungs . . .
"Your badge, show him your BADGE!" Some authority.

It's been a while since I have been asked to officiate at a wedding. But just a few years ago I officiated at 5 weddings in one year. The one thing I am required to say in the Marriage Ceremony is not the vows, or the prayers, or the scripture readings, or the blessings, or even - you can kiss the bride, but the words, "by the authority given unto me as a minister and by the State of CT, I proclaim you are now married". Authority given to me by my ordination. So, let's talk about authority.

And let's go back to the time of Jesus. It was a quiet place in the midst of a hot and noisy Palestinian city. There was probably a fountain in the center courtyard, with wind chimes dinging in the background. It probably had a guest house for visiting Rabbis and a school for children and adults. On the Sabbath people dressed in their best clothing and came to worship. They sang and thanked God and implored God's help. Jesus was becoming famous, so he was invited to teach at the synagogue. But no one could have anticipated what would happen next.

So, we are now in the Gospel according to Mark, last week, this week. Now the Gospel of Mark begins at a breathtaking pace – if you look, in just 20 verses, 20 verses, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, Jesus was baptized, tempted in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights, begins his ministry by calling the first disciples, and he's already teaching in the temple, and we're not even out of the first chapter! As one writer suggests, when reading the Gospel of Mark, "one is reminded of a child recounting some amazing tale, piling fact upon fact, as if the whole world depended upon it—which, of course, to Mark, it did." (1)

And according to Mark, Jesus' first act of ministry was to teach, and he never stopped teaching throughout his entire ministry. That's why he was always referred to as Rabbi, which means teacher. And the people who heard him teach were shocked and amazed. It's too bad that Mark doesn't tell us what he taught here, but that's because it wasn't his words that

mattered, it was the fact that he spoke from his heart, from the heart of God within him, not citing various spiritual authorities who taught him certain things to say. And this was something the people had never heard before. Plus, his words were always followed by action because for Jesus, teaching and healing went hand in hand. So right in the middle of teaching his lesson in the synagogue, a man cries out to him – “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” From the very *beginning* of his ministry Jesus is challenged - and recognized as one from God.

And like the Superbowl being played in a couple weeks, two powerhouses are about to meet. And it won't be by the number of completed passes or touchdowns that we will determine who has the greatest power, it will be by how the game is played. And in this encounter with Jesus, authority meets evil, or the love of Christ commands the presence of what is controlling this mentally ill person. And every time Jesus will win the game. You can bet on that!

I met my friend Joanne in Seminary and we have been friends for over 30 years. She just called this week. Anyway, back in those early years, I began serving churches in Youth Ministry and eased my way into Parish Ministry. Joanne began as a Chaplain in a Psychiatric Hospital and then a Chaplain in the Army National Guard, serving in Iraq and counseling the wounded in Germany. She is now a Colonel. I know, a Colonel! One evening when she had just begun her ministry at the Psychiatric Hospital, she came to tell me about her very hard day. The problem she was given was that there were three mentally ill patients who all believed they were Jesus Christ. The debates, quoting scripture, shouting in the hallways, was becoming disturbing to the other patients. Thinking of nothing else to do, she explained, she put them all in a room and began to work with them. After several hours, she said out came one Jesus Christ, one John the Baptist, and one Paul the Apostle. All was calm, for a while. And while we may think this is pretty humorous, as she always explained to me, mental illness is a very tricky thing but, in the end, like all of us, they simply want to be heard and loved.

Jews at the time of Jesus believed that people could be possessed or dominated by unclean or evil spirits, demons, and that all diseases, mental and physical were the result of punishment by God for something the person had done. And back then, people with mental and physical diseases were feared, oppressed, and forbidden to be a part of the community in any way – we wonder how this man even got into the temple! But Jesus wasn't afraid of disease, mental or physical, and spent a lot of his time healing people of their disease, all that separated them from God and their community, all that ailed them. And when Jesus healed, he paid close attention, not only to the person's physical symptoms but also to what was inside – to their faith, the whole person.

Now Jesus expels the man's unclean spirit or whatever possessed him, without the spells or rituals used back then – he simply states, “be quiet and come out!” “Have you come to destroy that which possesses us, that which turns us away from God and others?” Notice that this man's “demons” say what the Scribes are not saying – have you come to destroy us? Teaching like you do? And Jesus' response: “You bet I have!” Because in Mark's view, the Scribes teaching is basically “demon-like” because it doesn't liberate the people, it continues to oppress them. Jesus uses his own authority given by God right from the very beginning – and heals. Notice Jesus doesn't identify his title, a badge, or where his authority comes from – it is his “fame” that spread throughout the countryside, because the healings of Jesus were a

symbol of liberation to the people of all that oppressed them.

Jesus used the ability to strip the unclean spirit from the host, from this man. And this caused the spirits to lose all authority. He didn't eliminate the disease, eliminate the oppression, he denied its authority as a power to hold over the people. It no longer defined who they were in their community. Think about this message as it pertains to those Scribes, he was taking away their authority. And his teaching was not just deliberate, it was declarative, declaring facts he knew to be true. Jesus healed on the Sabbath because he valued people over religious laws, he healed the ones no one would touch with a ten-foot pole – the unclean, mentally ill, tax collectors, prostitutes, foreigners, widows, even children - because he valued people over traditions.

When the people then ask each other, "what is this"? They are really asking, how did he do it – what power and authority does his words possess that with just saying them, this man is made clean and whole again? Jesus didn't just talk about the kingdom of God; he demonstrated its liberating power.

While we may no longer believe in demons or unclean spirits, we know things that can possess us. Depression, addiction, disease, loss, grief, sorrow. We know disease, mental and physical disease as well as those things that possess us, things that overpower and consume us. In fact, I think it's one of the reasons why we come here, to receive strength to endure, embrace, and maybe even conquer our own demons or that which possesses us and separates us from God and others. And Jesus meets us here to challenge and encourage us, to renew and move us.

So what are your demons? What is it that possesses you or consumes you, and keeps you from fully enjoying this life given to you by God? Is it a fear of losing your job, or becoming involved in a new relationship, or facing a past experience; is it failure, or the unknown? Is it anxiety over money, status, or the welfare of your own children? Is it accepting your own physical or mental state, what must change, what you must let go? It's part of the reason we are hosting the panel discussion after church today, on issues around growing older, issues of resilience and acceptance, of a quality of life because growing old is not for the faint of heart! I told you my son is having a big birthday this week which means my birthdays are adding up as well!

And beyond us, look at the demons of society, things that consume people: homophobia, racism, sexism, classism, religious and ideological intolerance, violence at home or at school, poverty, terrorism, war, greed, globalization, global warming, media-infused fear that leads to paranoia - just to name a few! As one pastor states, "Unless we name the demons, they will name us; they will control us and destroy us. But it takes courage to do so, for it will make us unpopular. Some will consider us apostates, negating the faith. I am not sure that we are willing to pay that price, as Jesus did." We must struggle to believe that change can really happen. A better world is possible. (3).

And like the Prophet Moses states in our reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, we are all prophets, after all. And like Moses and Jesus, our prophecy should be about accepting all people, regardless of their situation. Like Moses and Jesus, our prophecy should be about reconciliation and forgiveness and humility and love.

And if we want healing for ourselves from the things that possess us; if we want to learn, become a prophet or disciple of Jesus, and be healed just like the man in the synagogue, there

are a few things we must do and the first is to be honest with ourselves. Stop pretending everything is fine when it isn't; confront our problems head on, no matter how scared we are. And, get help – seek doctors, research drugs and technology available, and recognize it as another place where God can and does work miracles.

And while science and doctors ask what, what is wrong; psychology asks why, why you feel as you do and that too is important. Healing, wholeness also may come from counselors, analysts, therapists or psychiatrists, for they can help us work with reconciliation, suppression, forgiveness, and acceptance. And while doctors ask what, and psychology asks why; it is faith that asks who, who do you want to be closer to – God, others?

Here may be the hardest part for some. To learn and be healed we must be open - open to faith and the healing power of God; be open to the touch of others, the touch of God, the power of prayer. As one pastor writes, anxiety, fear, and disease may never fully disappear, but the power of love and faith, can give us the hope and courage to embrace whatever comes our way. What Jesus really wants and needs from us is a hunger in our hearts for a healing of those relationships, those conflicts, those stressors, those diseases, which are causing disabilities, in ourselves. Jesus wants us to have a hunger for healing inside our souls. (4) And wants us to continue his teaching and healing by being a church that embraces others in that love.

Jesus, the great teacher, taught with authority and had the power from God to heal. He taught with authority because he loved what he taught and taught what he loved, God within him. He knew it was just what the people back then and us now need to hear, that God loves us no matter what – that God is present to guide us – that God gives us others to help us be healed - and that God gives to each of us our own badge so to speak, the power to love everyone.

In the name of the Holy and Awesome One, whose words and workings astounded the synagogue congregation in Capernaum, and who continues to astound all of us each and every day. Amen.

(1) Lewis, Karoline. www.workingpreacher.org, "Exorcisms for our Day".

(2) Vena, the Rev. Osvaldo. "Naming the Demons", www.workingpreacher.org.

(3) Willimon, Dean William. "The Teacher" Duke University Chapel, 2/2/1997.