

“What Have You to Do with Us?”
Mark 1:21-28
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Jesus and the four fishermen have not journeyed far since their initial encounter. Last week, we met them down by the Sea of Galilee where, two by two, Simon and Andrew and James and John dropped everything to follow Jesus. This week, we find them in a synagogue in the seaside town of Capernaum, where Jesus’ ministry begins. Geographically, they’ve hardly begun this new adventure, but theologically Jesus travels a long way in today’s story.

Just as he did not preface his call to the disciples with any small talk, Jesus enters the synagogue and jumps right in. He doesn’t test the political winds before he opens his mouth. He just starts teaching. When his teaching is disrupted by a man possessed with an unclean spirit, Jesus is forced into a confrontation that will set the course of his ministry from that day on.

It’s not uncommon in churches today to experience this kind of disruption. On one occasion, while I was making announcements during worship, a woman in the back row, with her two young children, stood up and said something. Startled, I looked up to see what the commotion was all about. I wasn’t sure who she was or what she wanted, but I decided to invite her to come up and make her announcement from the front.

It turned out that she was the new resident in a home owned by the congregation that provided housing for families transitioning from homelessness. She had wanted to come and say thank you. But no one had met her yet and I could see the anxiety in some faces as she made her way to the front of the sanctuary. Who was this person and what did she want?

Their fear was not totally unfounded, having experienced other occasions when someone stood up to say something out of order. The usual course of action was for the ushers to gently remove the person, the assumption being that the person was either drunk, high or suffering a psychotic break. The occasions were rare, but never unexpected.

In today’s story, we aren’t told much about the party crasher, but his description as unclean tells us everything we need to know. By definition, his “uncleanness” would have prevented his participation in study or worship in the synagogue. If the others had known this about him, he would have been shown the door immediately.

Maybe he slipped in that day because everyone was so focused on their guest and his amazing command of the Torah. But, as usual, Mark doesn’t tell us.

What we do know is that the presence of the unclean spirit forces Jesus into a confrontation in his very first act of public ministry. This spirit knows who Jesus is and forces him to reveal

himself whether he is ready or not. This is no introductory teaching lesson. Jesus unleashes the very power of God in this first encounter.

Faced with this party crasher, Jesus doesn't ask to have the man thrown out. Instead, he silences the unclean spirit in him with just a few words. And in so doing, he liberates this man from the power that holds him captive, removing the barrier that separated him from polite company.

Jesus restores the man, not just to health and wholeness, but to a relationship with the community that would not otherwise have been possible. According to religious law, people who were considered unclean were separated from those who were considered clean, forbidden from approaching God in worship or associating with others. Unclean people included those with mental illnesses, skin diseases, women who were menstruating, prostitutes, disabled persons, and, of course, non-Jews and foreigners.

In his very first act of ministry, Jesus calls this wall of separation into question, employing the power of God, who torn open the heavens, to bring all those barriers crashing down. Jesus declared God's kingdom had drawn near and here we get a glimpse of what that kingdom will look like.

The irony, of course, is that unclean spirit knows who Jesus is. The one who is not permitted to approach God knows who God is, but it's not clear that the others in the synagogue do. Instead they are amazed. "Wow. This guy teaches like no one else and he can even silence unclean spirits."

Not everyone can claim that the course of their vocation is set by the first day of work or ministry, but in Jesus' case, it is. This is the way he will operate, teaching and doing something new, breaking down barriers that separate people from one another and God.

But not without consequences.

Imagine yourself in the disciples' shoes. They are just getting to know him and they have no idea what is in store for them. They have no idea how the changes he is advocating will turn their world on its head; how they will upset the people in charge; how they will make people uncomfortable and upset, enough, in the end, to kill him.

Jesus strides into the synagogue and a turf war begins almost immediately.

Knowing that Jesus comes to challenge the system that defines who's in and who's out, the unclean spirit protests, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

It's not really a question so much as a statement.

It is

Mark's signal that Jesus has come to oppose all the forces that keep the children of God from the abundant life God desires for all of us. And that message matters because it is still the case: God wants the most for us from this life and stands in opposition to anything that robs us of the joy and community and purpose for which we were created.¹

As long as sexual harassment and abuse continues, that message still matters.

As long as the stigma of addiction or poverty or disability remains, that message still matters.

As long as refugees are shunned, that message still matters.

As long as violence is glorified, that message still matters.

As long as *anything* that keeps the children of God from the abundant life God desires for all of us, that message still matters.

And as long as the church of Jesus Christ fails to confront these realities, that message still matters.

Imagine yourselves in the disciples' shoes. Are you ready to carry that message to the places where it matters most?

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-4-b/>