

“Introducing Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (Pt. 2)”

Scripture: Mark 1:21-28

William C. Pender

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 1/29/12

Mark 1:21-28: 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.*

As I suggested last Sunday, we need to read the Gospel stories as an introduction to a present figure in our lives rather than a past figure. In other words, our Gospels are not biographies but are rather meant for us to encounter the living Christ—to know him better. The intention of each Gospel writer is to give news...good news of the living Lord Jesus Christ. News is current, contemporary, and connected to us and our lives.

In the first chapter of Mark, we are at the beginning of this encounter with Jesus. In this first chapter, we move through Jesus’ baptism, to the summary of his preaching that the Kingdom of God is at hand, to the call to the first disciples to leave their fishing boats and nets and come follow Jesus. And so the question is what is next? What do they, Jesus and the disciples, do next? The “they” is Jesus and the disciples or rather Jesus and you and me. We are along for this ride. They go to synagogue...we go to church.

Going to church...you may know about the conversation between the one dollar bill and the hundred dollar bill in the night depository at the bank. After all, we say “money talks”, right? Well, stay with me on this “money talk”. The hundred dollar bill talks about all the exotic places it has gone—fancy restaurants, cruise ships, the best hotels, and so on. “How about you?” says the hundred dollar bill to the one dollar bill. “All I do is go to church...go to church...go to church”. I think our offering counters would testify that they would faint to find a hundred dollar bill in the offering plate...but they sure count a lot of one dollar bills!

What do Jesus and disciples do—they go to church! As ordinary and humdrum as that might sound, this is the second act of Jesus’ ministry in this Gospel. Jesus met them on the lakeside and said “Follow me”. And then they all go to church.

The order here is important. You see, sometimes once we get in the church, we forget what it is like to be on the outside. We become “churchy”. Perhaps you know the character created by Dana Carvey on *Saturday Night Live*—the “Church Lady”. According to Dana Carvey, he created the character from the women he knew in church! Ouch! In case you do not know, the Church Lady takes great pleasure in commenting on the lack of piety of the guests she interviews. She interviews guests...sometimes the actual person (like a Sean Penn or Rob Lowe) and sometimes an actor playing the role (someone posing as a Hilary Clinton

or Dick Cheney). And the Church Lady takes undue interest in the desires of their “naughty parts”—both horrified and fascinated at the same time.

Jesus comes to church, along with us...and what happens is nothing like the “Church Lady”. He knows where we came from. We come from our careers, from our families, from our thrills, from our anxieties. Jesus met us there on that lakeshore—where we make our living—and he also brings us to church. In this sanctuary are all the back stories of our lives:

- married couples who are smiling with their teeth but have their stomachs twisted up in hurt and anger;
- people who responded “I’m fine” when asked “How are you doing?” but are wondering why ill health seems to be nipping at their heels;
- parents who are struggling with that “Here-we-go-again” feeling that all seems to be collapsing with their children
- And job concerns, self-destructive addictions, boredom, too much pressure, and so on.

All of that comes to church with Jesus and his disciples.

What happens next, with Jesus in the room, is amazement, astonishment, a sense of awe at his authority...a twofold authority in teaching and his care for a healthy spirit. Twofold: (1) in the synagogue or in the church, Jesus teaches with authority; and (2) in the synagogue or church, Jesus exorcises an impure spirit—cleans up an unclean spirit. The response of those present with Jesus is the same: “What is this? A new teaching with authority!”

Jesus teaches and cleans...with authority...with power. First and foremost, Jesus’ authority is found in and of himself. In this Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ message is summarized as the Kingdom of God coming close to us. In Jesus’ presence, we are close to God. Jesus himself is the content of his teaching—we are invited to both listen to him and look at him. Here’s what I mean. We may have rabbis, priests, teachers, and preachers in our lives...but we have only one path. The one who says in the Upper Room to his disciples: “I am the way, the truth and the life”.

It is similar to a story told by E. Stanley Jones, who served faithfully as a missionary in India for decades. He told the story of the missionary who got lost in the jungle. The missionary, after stumbling through the thick foliage, finally found a small village. He asked one of the villagers if he could lead him out of the jungle. The native said he could. “All right,” the missionary said, “Show me the way.” They walked for hours through dense brush, hacking their way through unmarked jungle. The missionary began to worry and said, “Are you quite sure this is the way? Where is the path?” The native said. “Bwana, in this place there is no path. I am the path.”¹

The new teaching with authority is like this: Jesus is the path. We listen; we look; we follow. And then we encounter a second sort of authority—not just for learning but a cleansing of the spirit. We find that on this day when Jesus has taught in the synagogue that a person with an unclean spirit breaks in. The indication is that this one of the regular attendees...not someone wandering off the street. What interrupts Jesus’ teaching is not a

¹ From sermons.com as of 1/27/12

stranger or a street person or an outsider but rather an “insider”. Moreover, the Gospel of Mark does not associate cleansing of an unclean spirit with the verb “to heal,” as in a physical ailment. Indeed, in the summary of the ministry of Jesus at the end of this day in Capernaum, healing the sick and dealing with unclean spirits are two different categories (Mark 1:33).

Jesus has authority over the unclean spirit—impure spirit—inside the synagogue, inside the church. Perhaps you are reminded as I am of one of the great prayers of the Old Testament found in Psalm 51.

¹⁰ *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*

¹¹ *Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.*

¹² *Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

Jesus addresses the spirit...with authority.

Now we do not live in the first century world, where everything that was unexplainable is attributed to demons and spirits. If anything, we live in world where we think that there is an explanation for everything. We are angry when doctors cannot give us a definitive diagnosis; we are frustrated that so often the drugs for mental concerns work so poorly; and pity the poor meteorologists—why can’t they get the weather forecast right? We assume everything is knowable, so mystery is unacceptable category. After all, if you cannot find it on the Internet, it must not be real!

So, education gives head knowledge. Sociology gives us cultural understanding. History gives us facts. Philosophy gives us concepts. Science teaches us the natural laws. Psychology teaches behavioral knowledge. Religion imparts theology. But in the end, none of these have the authority to control the moral demons that plague our spirit. We need something more...a new teaching...someone with authority.

If you are familiar with the recovery process, you know knowledge alone is not enough. We host both A.A. and Al-anon here at First Presbyterian Church. And there are meetings all around town. A.A. is, of course, for alcoholics; Al-anon is for family and friends who suffer because they love—for those bound to the alcoholic. What is foundational to the recovery process—both for the alcoholic and for those that love them and are also pulled into whirlpool of addiction—is, of course, the Twelve Steps. And the first step is to acknowledge the whirlpool—that addiction makes life unmanageable. As long as you believe you can handle things on your own, you don’t need any more authority in your life. No one finishes the recovery process—the alcoholic says “I am an alcoholic”, not “I was an alcoholic”. The first step in the Twelve Steps is to acknowledge the need. The second step is come to a belief—a trust—that only a higher power can bring us to sanity. Knowledge is not enough...a higher power in our life is needed.

You do need to be an addict to a self-destructive habit to know the truth of these first two steps. We all enter the church with an unclean spirit. Our lives so quickly can become unmanageable. For example, the author and poet Kathleen Norris bares her life of faith with us in her book, *Amazing Grace*: (page 49):

When I think of the demons I need to exorcise, I have to look inward, to my heart and soul. Anger is my best demon, useful whenever I have to go into a Woman

Warrior mode, harmful when I use it to gratify myself, either in self-justification, or to deny my fears. My husband, who has a much sweeter nature than I, once told me that my mean streak grieved him, not just because of the pain it cause him but because it was doing me harm. His remark...felt like an exorcism. Not that my temptation to anger was magically gone, but I was called to pay closer attention to something that badly needed attention, and that was hurting our marriage. It confirmed my understanding of marriage as a holy act: one can no more hide one's true faults from a spouse than from God, and in exorcising the demon of anger, that which could kill is converted, transformed into that which can heal.

We come to church as those with unclean spirit and Jesus keeps showing at church with us. Yes, he calls from where we have been. And we follow. He is the both the teacher and the content of the teaching. And he addresses not just the knowledge or facts, but rather our health...our spiritual health. And we know we keep wandering off, and he keeps saying: "Follow me."

Envision it this way: some of you probably know what a "conga line" is. Long before such dances as the "Electric Slide" and Macarena—a "conga line" was one of the first line dances. With a Cuban or Latin beat in the music, you line up behind a leader and move in a processional: three step, then kick to the side; three steps and kick to the other side. The music makes us a demand on us to get in line and follow. There is a spirit that invites us in.

Similarly, here is the twofold authority of Jesus: we get in line and we follow what we hear and what see. And we catch spirit...a spirit of health. We dance in line behind Jesus [music introduction begins to "I Danced in the Morning"].

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,
And I came down from heaven
and I danced on the earth,
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

Refrain

Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.

I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee,
But they would not dance
and they would not follow me;
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John;
They came to me and the dance went on.

Refrain

I danced on the sabbath when I cured the lame,
The holy people said it was a shame;
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me
high;
And they left me there on a cross to die.

Refrain

I danced on a Friday and the sky turned black;
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back;
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone,
But I am the dance and I still go on.

Refrain

They cut me down and I leapt up high,
I am the life that'll never, never die;
I'll live in you if you'll live in me;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

Refrain