



Roanoke, Virginia
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“The Teacher as Exorcist”

Mark 1:21-28

George C. Anderson

Figure this out. Matthew, Luke and John all have extensive passages where Jesus is teaching. Very little of his teachings are found in Mark. And yet, in Mark, Jesus is called “Teacher” more than in the other gospels..., and sometimes in the oddest of places.

Our scripture passage this morning is a good example. Listen:

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he (Jesus) 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.

Did we just hear about a teaching... or an **exorcism**?

Certainly, the story *begins* with Jesus teaching. Today is Rally Day Sunday here at Second Presbyterian so I want us all to *pay attention* to the first verse: On the Sabbath, there is teaching going on. Yes, the Sabbath is a day of rest. Yes, the Sabbath is a day for worshipping God. And, yes, the Sabbath is a day for *Sabbath School*... Sunday School. Jesus is teaching a Pop-Up Sabbath School class. So, on Sunday, come to worship and come to learn. (Proud of me, Rev. Link?)



During this particular Sabbath School lesson, something happens as often happens in teaching. Someone challenges Jesus. This can be a good thing. Give and take between teacher and student can keep things lively and interesting. The Socratic method of teaching counts on it. Plato describes Socrates as questioning and challenging students and students questioning and challenging Socrates in return. When done well, good things happen. Assumptions and logic can be challenged, facts established... there might even be discovered in the space between teacher and student new insights that neither would have come to on their own.

The key, though, is that there be a willing and open spirit between teacher and students so that open debate doesn't become entrenched argument.

There is no willing and open spirit between Jesus and this challenger however. The spirit is unclean. And the unclean spirit isn't between the two, it is within the student.

What does that mean, "he has an unclean spirit?" Are we talking about demon possession here? Jesus stops being the Teacher and becomes the Exorcist?

If it is the case that this is an exorcism, this is pretty great, isn't it? A slave is liberated from a Pharaoh. Only the Pharaoh isn't over the man but in him. Like Moses of old, Jesus commands the Pharaoh that is in this man to "Let God's child go," and the spirit convulses, screams, and leaves the man behind. No more spinning heads in Synagogue that day. Pretty exciting. On a surface level reading, that is what happens.

Some today would say, "No, that is an ancient view of the world, reflecting a day when people did not know how to explain things like mental illness." In our modern day, we can now diagnose what once could only be understood as possession.

Around 18 years ago- so long ago I don't know if any of you remember it- a man about three rows back in front of the lectern, obviously confused, stood up and started condemning this church and me for heresy. It was during the announcements (I don't know what announcement could be heretical). The congregation was great. No one panicked. He wasn't ushered out. I simply thanked him for what he had to offer that day, he sat down, and we went on with worship with no more interruptions.

Was he possessed? No. He just had some things going on.

But you know what, I am pretty sure no one would have said he was possessed in Jesus' day either. I used to buy into that line of thinking more than I do now, that there were medical conditions back then that were blamed on demons. That might be true sometimes, but I am not so sure anymore. I am not so sure *particularly in regard to mental illness* because, truth be told, more of us than we know or are willing to admit have some issue dealing with mental health. There are varieties of mental illness, but I don't see the sense in calling them all unclean any more than calling conditions like glaucoma, diabetes or high blood pressure unclean. And all we are doing is speculating anyway.



What is important for us to keep in mind is that these stories in Mark are told for theological reasons, and if we put speculating aside, I think we will come up with a better understanding of the *kind of unclean spirit* Jesus overcomes.

Pay attention to how Mark tells the story. Jesus is **teaching**, and this man comes on the attack. He's not Socratically challenging Jesus, he is confronting Jesus. Jesus speaks to him, and the man is transformed. Someone who is bitter and hateful becomes calm and friendly. A relationship that was conflicted and adversarial becomes gentle. The people who see it are amazed.

What would you wonder if you just saw an exorcism such as those portrayed in the Exorcism movies you saw but which *I did not, and probably never will?* Wouldn't you ask, "What kind of miracle worker his this?" Or, "What kind of magic is he working?"

This is what those who see the "exorcism" say. They ask, "What is this? *A new teaching?*"

Now let's ask ourselves, "What kind of unclean spirits are overcome by *teaching?*"

Can we start with simple ignorance? When I was younger, I had an infected gum. Some know-it-all told me that I needed to brush it harder. I did, and it only made it hurt worse. I talked to my uncle who is a dentist to seek his advice and I assured him that I was brushing it hard like I was supposed to. He asked, "Does that hurt?" I said, "Yes." Then in his excellent bedside manner, he said, "Then cut it out!" He then told me what to do. Now I have a recessed gum in that spot that Dr. Norbo's office always warns me about. I haven't been able to bring myself to tell them how it got there. It was because of simple ignorance which brought harm.

Ignorance is an unclean spirit that can harm and diminish children's lives and that is why we educate them. For women in cultures where they are poor and trapped in subservient roles, education has proven to be the most effective path to dignity. Education raises "economic productivity, lowers infant and maternal mortality, improves nutritional status and health, reduces poverty," and greatly reduces communicable diseases.¹

You can bet, though, that this story in Mark is about an unclean spirit that is more terrible than simple ignorance. The man's unclean spirit might be less about the ignorance of uneducated women in cultures of poverty and oppression and more to do with the kind of spirit of those who want to keep them ignorant in order to keep them obedient and subservient.

What plagues human life and dignity is a kind of intentional and chosen ignorance. It is the spirit of an ideology or agenda that will distort and even reject facts and truths to serve some cause of power like greed or lust. Unclean spirits could be racism, superstition, sexism, victimizing, victim claiming, and demonizing (Think about that- the act of demonizing may itself be a demon spirit in Jesus' eyes).

¹ Maritza Ascencios of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Media Center.



Think of this man who comes at Jesus being an Alex Jones type who has put so much effort into constructing a conspiracy theory that the Sandy Hook shootings were an elaborate hoax. This is ignorance, but a *chosen* ignorance. It is ignorance, but not stupidity. His chosen delusions and manipulation of fears have made him rich.

At this point, maybe we can understand why someone who recognizes Jesus as the “Holy One of God” would nevertheless attack Jesus. He willingly opposes the truth-opposes God, who is the author of truth (with the truth being more than facts, but what is right, and good, and decent)- because Jesus’ truth is getting in the way of what he wants. Saul Bellow said, “A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for ignorance is deep.”

Could something of a chosen ignorance, a blind agenda, be the unclean spirit in the man who comes at Jesus while he is teaching?

Mark will tell of Jesus going through these kinds of attacks again and performing a similar exorcism. You can read about it in chapter 12.

The chapter tells of powerful opponents of Jesus conspiring together to entrap Jesus. One by one, they come at him with “Gotcha Questions.” First, Herodians and Pharisees come and ask him about paying taxes to Caesar knowing those listening think of the Romans as an occupying force to be opposed. Then Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection, ask Jesus a “What if?” question about the resurrection hoping he’ll sound crazy answering it. Jesus handles them too.

But in neither case is there an exorcism because, bested, they go back to conspire again against him.

And then, here comes a third. He is a scribe with a Bible question and, as we heard in our scripture lesson, Mark doesn’t think much of how scribes interpret the Bible. The Scribe asks a question and the context of the story suggests that he has his own answer to the question he is going to ask, and he hopes to blow Jesus out of the rhetorical water after hearing whatever poor answer Jesus gives.

“Hey Jesus, in all the Bible, what is the greatest commandment?”

Jesus answers, “The greatest commandment is to love God with everything you’ve got, and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now comes the jaw drop moment of *an exorcism*.

Instead of coming back at Jesus or sulking away as the others did after being bested, the scribe says, “My God, you are right. That is the greatest commandment.” And suddenly there is that gentle spirit between them. And Jesus responds, “My friend, you are not far from the kingdom of heaven.” Because of the scribe’s answer? No. Because of his spirit.

Could it be that those who saw Jesus in our passage exorcising the man with an unclean spirit, and then responding, “What new teaching is this?” saw something amazing. Someone with a chosen ignorance has a sudden humility to hear, accept and embrace an



opponent's perspective. Only Jesus isn't an opponent now, for there is now a friendship spirit between them.

You see, Mark has this strong belief in the amazing power of the Word of God- here taught, in other places preached, in other places enacted in baptism and the last supper, in other places shown by example, and in the life of Jesus and in the lives of those who reflect Jesus, lived- he has this strong belief in the amazing power of the Word of God to overcome unclean spirits that mock God² and degrade dignity, justice, mercy and kindness. Jesus says a word, and someone attacking him becomes someone embracing a shared truth; someone bitter becomes sweet, someone closed becomes open. Someone comes close to the kingdom of God.

Again, this being Rally Day Sunday, let's narrow the Word of God back to teaching. Can teaching the heart of the Gospel rightly- not as propaganda for another agenda- can rightly teaching the heart to the Gospel tame our worst impulses and seed the ennobling virtues that we admire in people who make of this world a better place?

We Presbyterians have always thought so. Historically, Presbyterians have this conviction that knowledge without moral virtue becomes a tool of power, and virtue without knowledge becomes superstition... which is to say another tool of power. And so, we teach hearts and minds, and it has been our most effective form of evangelism. Our greatest glories come of education to overcome simple ignorance, and to overcome intentional ignorance that promotes the degradation of human persons, communities and God's world.

We have performed exorcisms through teaching in large ways. I love to tell the story of Scotland's exorcism: its transformation from a backward land of poverty, ignorance and harsh tribalism to the leading nation in Europe in education and prosperity- and all because of a religious movement led by Presbyterians to educate every child's heart and head.

We have performed exorcisms through teaching in small ways. I could drown you with examples, but I'll just say my own life was transformed in church and at a college that addressed my heart as well as my head.

What we are seeking to offer here at Second Presbyterian- and what we hope you'll support through participation, prayers, and pledge- are opportunities where the living Jesus might work to overcome simple ignorance, and to equip people to deal with the intentional ignorances that do so much damage in our world. We seek the exorcism of the demons that demean us. We seek to teach the content of faith, address issues that we can't avoid, promote the kind of Socratic give and take where new insights might be gained in the exchange, and where friendships are formed between those who rightly- which is to say, lovingly- engage each other in seeking God's truth: the truth that is always beyond us and discovered between us.

² Even in God's name- religious propaganda for unholy causes, claiming them in God's name, is not God's Word.

