

With Authority
Sermon for East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church
January 29, 2012
Rev. Jim Stover

Text: Mark 1: 21-28

Theme: We who are under the authority of Jesus are called to follow him by engaging in acts of boundary-crossing, relationship-restoring, risky love.

Last week we began by discussing how Mark in his Gospel is not interested in wasting time with flowing prose or exact chronological details, but rather wants to get straight to the point. And we see that yet again in our passage today. Last week, Jesus burst onto the scene proclaiming the kingdom of God – God’s ultimate authority – which changes our entire perspective on our lives and world and calls us to live in a new way. Now – immediately after – Jesus puts that kingdom into action. And that is, in fact, the call for us today as well.

In our passage today we have Jesus casting out an “unclean spirit.” While the passage begins by purporting to be about Jesus’ teaching, we don’t have even a single word of what Jesus has actually taught. Here, at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry still in the very first chapter of Mark, we have no sermon, we have no parable; instead we have a miracle. And this miracle will be followed by two more miraculous healings.

What Mark gives us is a proclamation – not in words but rather in deeds – that God reigns supreme, and no force of evil, no physical or mental ailment, nothing can stand in the way of the advance of the kingdom of God made known in Jesus Christ.

Thus, our passage today is, as it says twice, a declaration of Jesus’ authority. While last week we talked about plugging into the power and perspective that the kingdom of God brings, this week the message for us is about how we who live under the authority of Jesus are called to put the kingdom into action.

But how are we to do that? And the question is especially poignant when we are faced with a passage about an exorcism.

While it may be tempting to debate the existence of evil spirits or get into speculation about “what really happened” those two-thousand years ago, either

of those discussions would miss the point. At its core, our passage today is about Jesus and his call upon our lives here and now.

Thus, when we are confronted with miracle stories in Scripture, the important question is not “What really happened?” but rather “What did this happening really mean?”¹

To get to that question of meaning, we need to step back a bit and understand more about the thought-world of the people of Jesus’ time. One of my favorite resources, the *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, states that during the time of Jesus everything that happened was attributed to a person or a person-like being, such as a god or a spirit. There was no concept of germs causing disease, and certainly no concept of mental illness. Thus, if a person behaved oddly or in any way outside of what was considered normal, they were thought to be possessed by spirits or demons.

The worst part was that when such a label was applied to someone, they were shunned – they were cut off from their relationships with their family and their community. Therefore, as the authors write, “Freeing a person from demons... implied not only exorcising the demon but restoring the person to a meaningful place in the community as well.”²

This restoring of broken relationships is at the heart of what Jesus is doing in our passage, and at the heart of Jesus’ call for us today. Whatever is really going on with this man in the synagogue, it is clear that his relationships are broken – his relationship with God, his relationship with the community, and even his relationship with his own self. In casting out the “unclean spirit,” Jesus is healing those broken relationships and welcoming the man back into the community of the people of God.

We see this all the time with Jesus. While others wish to set strict limits on who is and who is not loved by God, Jesus carries God’s inclusive love out beyond all accepted boundaries. Whether it is the demon-possessed or lepers or

¹ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1983), 20.

² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 182.

prostitutes or tax collectors, Jesus is always seeking out “the least and the lost” and bringing them back into community with God and God’s people.

Ultimately, Jesus even breaks down that most sacred of barriers between Jews and non-Jews, sending God’s love out to the whole world.

This is what gives us the wonderful words of Paul from Galatians 3: 28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The Church in its history has not always done a good job of remembering this declaration that, in Jesus, God’s love broke through all barriers of race and ethnicity, of wealth and social standing, of gender and so many more. We are still struggling to comprehend that boundary-breaking love today; and yet our passage today confronts us with a clear call to put that kind of love into action.

Gretchen Ziegenhals, shares a story that I believe helps us to understand the call of our particular passage for us today. She writes, “My daughter was eating lunch with a friend at an inner-city diner when they saw a painfully thin young woman stagger down the center of the street outside, her face and limbs contorted and flailing, her eyes rolled back into her head. Soon a police car pulled up. An officer cautiously approached the woman, whose limbs were moving spastically. After four more squad cars had arrived, police began searching the woman for drugs or other clues to her odd behavior. Finally they handcuffed her, led her to a police car and drove her away.

This woman's affliction may have been drug-related or it may have been caused by a physical ailment.”³ We simply don’t know. But what is clear is that this young woman, like the man in our passage today, was in desperate need of the boundary-crossing love of Jesus to bring her back into relationship with God, with her community, and with her own body.

We may not all be equipped to reach out to address issues of drug-addiction or mental or physical illness, but all of us who are called to follow Jesus are indeed called to follow him in acts of boundary-crossing love that restore broken relationships with God and with community.

³ Gretchen E. Ziegenhals, “Living by the Word: Sunday, January 29” in *The Christian Century*, 25 January 2012, 20.

For some of us, that may mean reaching out to that unpopular and ostracized kid at school. Those of us who have moved well beyond the social world of our youth should never forget what a risky act of faith-filled bravery reaching out like that can be.

For others of us, boundary-crossing, relationship-restoring love may mean visiting Greensboro Nursing Home and letting the older adults there know that they are still a part of our community. And for many of us, crossing that threshold is deeply, deeply challenging.

I know that I, myself was challenged to expand my thinking about boundary-crossing, relationship-restoring, risky love when Lee Ferry, my colleague at St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church in Hardwick, forwarded to me an email last week. It was about a training for a program called Circles of Support & Accountability, wherein community members provide support to shepherd an ex-inmate through their first year out of prison. Talk about reaching out to the least and the lost!

As one of the leaders of this program wrote in the email, “When I was a prison chaplain, I worked with a number of men who wanted to change their lives. I even baptized two of them. Sometimes I was able to connect an inmate with a church when he was leaving, but mostly men were released with no help to keep them from falling back into their old ways when they left the structure of prison life. I wished that there were some way to support them in changing as they returned to their communities from the ‘sheltered, life of the prison.’”

As I reflected on today’s passage and heard the Spirit speaking to us about putting risky, boundary-crossing, relationship-restoring love into action, I couldn’t help but think about Lee’s email and our Savior’s words, ““The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners.” (Luke 4: 18-19 NIV)

Friends, our main theme today is this: As Jesus reached out with God’s inclusive love to those who had been set outside the boundaries of the community in his own day, so we, too, are called to engage in acts of that kind of boundary-crossing, relationship-restoring, risky love.

In our passage today, Jesus restores to the community of the people of God a man whom the community had labeled as having an “unclean spirit.” The crowd in the synagogue is fascinated by this, but they keep their distance from Jesus wondering about his authority. We who know Jesus’ authority and have committed ourselves to following him are not offered the option of sitting back and just being amazed.

We are told to open our eyes to those who have been set outside the boundaries of polite society in our day and age, and to reach out to them with the boundary-crossing, relationship-restoring, risky love of Jesus. Whether the Spirit leads us to the prisoners, ex-convicts, immigrant farm workers, the disabled, or those who don’t have the material means to participate in society today, reaching across these kinds of boundaries is exactly what those who know the authority of Jesus to proclaim the kingdom of God in word and deed are called to do.

To conclude, let me quote commentator Gary Charles: “[R]eaders of Mark’s Gospel are put on notice from chapter 1 that the boundary-breaking, demon-dashing, law-transcending Son of God has arrived in the person of Jesus, and he expects of his followers far more than ‘amazement,’”⁴ he expects action.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

⁴ Gary W. Charles, “Exegetical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (year B, vol. 1), ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 313.