

The Rev. Erin Hensley
Mark 1:21-28
January 29, 2012

On Being Real

As twenty first century Americans, we live in a culture that lives on the surface, that implicitly values keeping up appearances. We spend billions of dollars on cosmetics and weight loss products. We spend thousands of hours to make our homes and ourselves look just so. Shopping is a national pastime. We do all of these things to appear calm, cool, and most importantly, collected. We want others to see our surfaces, literally and metaphorically speaking, as smooth and polished as possible. We fear others knowing what is really happening in our lives. Yet here you and I are, drawn to worship the God who never lives merely on the surface. Here you and I are, drawn to the God who in Christ beckons us to be real.

Thousands of years ago on a typical Saturday, two parents struggle to get their teenager out of bed to go to the synagogue. A man has had a week fraught with conflict and as he walks to the synagogue he prays for a break, a bit of comfort. A single woman is not sure if she believes in God after what she's experienced, but she knows she needs to be with other people. With slow, uncertain steps she makes her way to worship. As they enter the synagogue, a greeter asks "How are you?" They politely smile and say "I'm doing great, thanks" and scurry to find a seat as soon as possible. And somehow someone who seems a little off, definitely not calm and collected, makes his way to Jesus while he is teaching. In the middle of his presentation, this man faces Jesus and cries, "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."

Jesus does not run away. Jesus does not dismiss this man. Jesus does not even ask for him to sit down so he can continue teaching. Instead, Jesus, the teacher, Jesus, the healer, orders the unclean spirit to, "Be silent!" and leave the man alone. Clearly and without apology, Jesus tells that unclean spirit, whatever destructive memory or fear or attachment it may be, to hit the road. The release of that spirit is painful, yet ultimately the man is restored to his right mind. What was hidden is made plain. What was shadow is brought into light. What was dis-eased is now well.

You see, Jesus is about not about living on the surface. Jesus is about the work of the Kingdom of God being near. And in order for us to see that kingdom we need to repent, we need to change our mind. Such conversion happens more easily when our metaphorical demons come face to face with the living Christ. Addiction to a substance, addiction to work, addiction to what a certain person thinks of us can possess us and run our lives. An old wound that has not had enough attention paid to it can take hold of how we relate to others. A deep-seated fear can keep us from doing what we are called to do, being who we were to be. We can be so possessed by these demons that we live in constant pain, fear, or dread, which is really no way to live at all. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we cannot conquer these demons on our own. Living as if they do not exist will do us no good.

What will do us good, what will move us closer to being in our true, right mind is an encounter between these metaphorical demons and Jesus. We need not hide or pretend anymore. We need not live merely on the surface. Jesus of Nazareth has everything to do with the destructive forces within us. He has faced them and he knows them, just as much as he knows you and me. He was tempted with control and fame in the wilderness and did not give in. He faced friends who betrayed him and did not leave them. He faced violence without returning violence. In Christ, through Christ, with Christ, God in essence says, “You do not have to hide this part of yourself anymore. You do not have to be scared of these demons’ power. They can talk, but they will not have the last word. They will not overtake you. For reality is greater than illusion; understanding is greater than fear; love is always stronger than death.”

I must confess that I rarely want Jesus to see my demons. Admitting my intention, admitting why I do what I do can be painful. Naming that how I relate to someone may be based more on a hurt from another person many years ago is not something I enjoy. The fear of losing a particular kind of life or a particular relationship over and above what God wants is something I’d like to hide, thank you very much.

Although I don’t want Jesus to see these destructive forces, I need these inner realities to meet Jesus. I need my demons to be seen and heard by God so that they can be released. I need my demons to be seen and heard by God so that there is more room for the light of Christ within myself and within my life.

In a few moments, we will share Holy Communion. The real presence of Christ will be there waiting for you. From what do you need to be released in order to know the love of Christ more deeply? What would it be like to let the pain, the fear, the destructive attachments cry out? What would it be like to freely and without shame offer them to Jesus?

There is not a single demon God in Christ has not faced. He can handle whatever destructive pains, fears, and attachments you have to share. You need not fear. Jesus will not punish us for being human, for being broken. Jesus will not punish us if we are not calm or collected. You see God incarnate is not really interested in keeping up appearances. Christ is interested in you. Christ is interested in you and I being healed so that we can be his body in the world, nothing more and nothing less. And for that, thanks be God. *Amen.*