

What is this? A new teaching!

Meditation on Mark 1:21-28

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Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

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.

We had two friends from church over our house for dinner on Friday night. We had a delicious meal, prepared by my wonderful chef husband, Jim. Hot spinach/artichoke/cheese dip for an appetizer. Chicken Francais as the main course with green beans almondine, pasta with a spinach sauce, and apple pie with ice cream for dessert. I set the dining room table on Grandma's blue tablecloth covered with lace. We don't usually eat fancy meals, and we hardly ever sit at the dining room table. More often, we are eating a simple meal on stools pulled up to our kitchen counter.

These friends had never been to our home before, though we had been talking about having them over for some time. We have all sorts of

excuses why we don't have guests very often-- mostly how busy we are. But it isn't just our full schedule that keeps us from having people over. It's the time and work involved getting ready for guests.

A few hours before our friends arrived, we still had the Christmas tree up and our beige carpet needed some serious vacuuming. In the kitchen, newspapers were stacked high and dirty laundry overflowed their baskets. The bathroom needed a thorough cleaning and de-cluttering.

Why do we stress out about cleaning our homes before guests come over? We don't want people to see our homes messy, even though some of us have homes that look lived in most of the time. And we don't want people to see us when we look a mess, either, just like people don't post photos of themselves on Facebook unless they look good.

On Sunday morning at church, our need to show our most attractive self to the world continues. We wear our Sunday best, rather than the more informal clothing we wear at home. But we hide our true feelings, too. When people greet us with, "Hi, how are you?" we almost always answer, "Fine!" even when we might not really be feeling our best or are troubled by a family problem or a strained relationship with a friend, or worried about a loved one struggling with illness.

We don't want everyone to see our messiness, brokenness and vulnerability, even though every one of us is messy, broken, and vulnerable--and loved by God, just as we are.

Picture this: it's Capernaum, a small fishing village on the north end of the Sea of Galilee. It's the Sabbath, a day set apart for worship, prayer, and studying God's word. The entire community is gathered for a holy encounter in the synagogue. And they are listening to the best teaching they have ever had. They are astounded at this uneducated young man named Jesus, a nobody, the son of a carpenter from a tiny village with a bad reputation. As Nathanael will say to Phillip in John 1:46, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (NIV)

The people of Capernaum don't know the Son of God is bringing the message that, strangely enough, isn't recorded in Scripture. You'd think that something so amazing would be retold and written down. But it's not the message that matters this time but the way he is preaching--and what happens when he does. He is teaching with "authority," "unlike the scribes." The scribes weren't just copiers of Scripture; they were educated teachers and interpreters of God's Word. This Greek word for "authority" --*exousia* --may also be translated "power." It was often applied to kings but was also associated with what the Lord will have when His reign has fully come. But what is this "new teaching" they keep talking about?

Well, as the people, dressed and behaving in their Sabbath best, are listening to Christ's amazing preaching, "Just then, there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit" yelling at Jesus. "Unclean spirit" is Jewish terminology for a demon. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" says the demon. "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

It isn't clear if the man with the demon suddenly enters the synagogue or if he has been there all along, undetected by the people. It's also not clear if there is more than one demon in the man, since the demon says "us"--or if the demon is speaking for all demons everywhere, challenged by Christ's *exousia*. The demon uses "fighting words," revealing his insecurity, fear and unwillingness to give up his power over the man. Evil rejoices in suffering, brokenness and lies, and seeks to "destroy" what belongs to God--all of us.

Christ speaks to the demon directly, rebuking him in vs. 25, "Be silent, and come out of him! ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, comes out..." The words translated with a more polite, "be silent" are slang and more like our less polite, "Shut up!" Jesus isn't messing around.

This exorcism in the synagogue IS the new teaching that will bring Jesus fame throughout the "surrounding region of Galilee." Christ's "authority" won't sit well with the religious leaders. Christ's *exousia* is always used for God's glory and for the good of human beings. Religious leaders will question and challenge his *exousia* --his power to heal and, and most of all, his authority to forgive.

But now, the people at the synagogue are amazed by Christ's display of power. They say to one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." We will hear echoes of this exclamation in Mark 4:41, when Jesus calms the storm. "Who then is this," his disciples will ask in awe, "that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

I found myself replaying, over and over, this dramatic scene of an exorcism in a holy, worship space this week. Not having any experience with exorcism or spiritual warfare, this passage speaks to me as a revelation of Christ's power used for an act of kindness and healing. Jesus accepts this man, just as he is--messy, sinful, offensive, broken and vulnerable, for all the community to see. But Jesus isn't about to leave him held captive by evil.

As Paul says in Ephesians 6:12, ¹² "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Christ isn't afraid of demons, just as we are taught to "fear no evil" in Psalm 23, for our loving Shepherd is always with us. And he doesn't let the rules of his community stop him from healing on the Sabbath.

Only one person is healed on that day, as the community gathers around God's Word. The message that they fail to hear and see, in their amazement over Christ's power, is that those who are outcasts from the community, the obviously unclean and offensive, are still loved and cared for by God. Christ does not withhold his grace and mercy from this man, in such great need of healing. Neither should we withhold grace and mercy from others.

Nor should we ever hide our true selves from one another or God --or else we who are broken and sinful will not experience the spiritual healing and peace that Christ alone can give.

On Friday, when Jim and I gathered with two Christian friends

around a delicious meal, blessed by the Spirit, the surroundings faded into the background as we shared our private joys and hidden sorrows with one another. It didn't matter if we were in a clean or a messy house. It didn't matter whether we were wearing our Sunday best or our most informal attire. Our gracious and merciful God used us--willing though cracked vessels-- to be instruments of his healing love.

We are the ones being sent out for Christ's sake. For the Savior's *exousia* that God gave to him has been given to us to use for Him. Jesus says in Matthew 28:18-20a, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

To be a witness for Him, we allow others to see us as we truly are, giving God all the glory! We are fearful and vulnerable but confident and courageous in Him. We are weak and broken but strong and whole in Him. We are sinful but forgiven and being transformed by Him, day by day. And when we encounter evil, we need not fear. The *exousia* never runs out. His Spirit lives within us. As Christ assures his disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Let us pray....

Heavenly Father, thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, who, with all the power you gave to him, used it for your glory and for the good of human beings, even those who are on the margins or are outcasts from society. Thank you for loving us just the way we are--messy, sinful, vulnerable, weak-- and forgiving for all our sins through your Son's work on the

cross. Thank you for your promise to transform us into His likeness, day by day. Use us, Lord, broken vessels, to be instruments of your healing and grace in our communities. Help us, Lord, to be unafraid to confront evil and injustice with your power, the power of love, evils such as racism, prejudice, hatred, greed, selfishness, and discrimination. May we feel your loving presence with us always as we seek to follow you. Give us your vision of the peaceable Kingdom, when your reign has fully come. In Christ we pray. Amen.