

“What Is This?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 1: 21-28

“What is this?” Have you asked that in the last week? Maybe you were going through the mail, and you found a bill that had charges on it that made no sense to you, and you asked, “What is this?” Perhaps you receive an email that announces some meeting you’re supposed to attend that day, but you have no record of it on your calendar, and you ask, “What is this?” Maybe, as you are getting ready in the morning in the bathroom, you notice something odd on your skin or face in the mirror, and you ask, “What is this?”

At our house, that phrase most often is not said with a sense of inquisitiveness, but more a tone of disdain – usually directed at our pets. We will come home from work or school, and there will be trash strewn on the living room floor, or a bag of treats mysteriously chewed into, or, worse yet, the dog decides that the guest bedroom floor is the perfect spot to leave a present. “What is this?” is often said in the Mansell household not out of curiosity, but out of frustration and annoyance.

When Jesus and his disciples entered Capernaum, it is at the beginning of his earthly, adult ministry. And with that, there is a sense of newness, of uncertainty, of amazement on the part of all he comes in contact with. Perhaps the response of the crowds that day not only describes their interaction with the living, loving God, but it also describes our feeling when we witness Christ acting in our midst in unexpected ways.

Previous to this passage in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan, he withstands forty days of temptation in the wilderness, and he calls his first disciples by the Sea of Galilee. As he enters Capernaum, he brings with him Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, and they most certainly had to be as wide-eyed and uncertain about what was about to happen as the crowds they encountered.

Being the Sabbath day, Jesus does what all faithful Jews would do: he goes to the synagogue for worship. However, Jesus is no ordinary Jew, and that is made clear in verse 22: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Many times in our modern culture, we will hear the word “authority” with negative impressions. We will interpret authority as authoritarian, leaving no room for discussion or debate. That is not the meaning of authority in this context. Instead, Jesus spoke and taught with confidence, with clarity, and with precision about God’s law and

love for the people. He opened their eyes and hearts in a new way, a way that startled them and caused them to say, "What is this?"

Then, in the midst of his teaching in the synagogue, Jesus is met by a man "with an unclean spirit." Ironically, it is the spirit that correctly identifies Jesus: he is the Holy One of God. But this spirit also echoes the uncertainty and even the threat that Jesus poses to the established order: "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?" The unclean spirit knows who Jesus is, but also is fearful of what his presence might mean for this world.

Jesus then does something that would have been counter to the traditional Jewish laws: he heals the man on the Sabbath day. Those who would have observed this healing – the crowds, the temple leaders, Jesus' disciples – they all would have been taken aback by this action, for healing was considered work, and work was prohibited on the Sabbath. And yet, Jesus does not operate under the traditional rules; he has come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And so, the crowds' reaction is understandable: "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even unclean spirits, and they obey him'" (1:27).

One commentator notes that "in biblical language, 'impure' means, simply, contrary to the sacred. All that is against the sanctity of God is considered impure. Jesus' teaching liberates the oppressed man in the synagogue. He doesn't name the illness (blindness, paralysis, etc.). It is simply called 'impure': it is dominated by an antihuman spirit, which Jesus discovers, and he makes it speak. This word defines Jesus. He goes to the synagogue to teach by healing. His gospel is a healing word and action. The Jesus of Mark's Gospel has offered, inside the very synagogue, his teaching of freedom, a word and act that heals the human being" (Ofelia Ortega, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 310-312).

It is in a space and time of worship that Jesus offers a word and act that heals the human being.

When we come into this space on a Sunday or any other time, it is to worship the living, loving God. What we bring with us into this space can run the gamut. We can greet one another and say we're doing fine, but we're unlikely to tell our brother or sister in Christ sitting next to us what is really going on. We're too protective, too proud, too ashamed to do that.

We won't speak of the inner anguish we feel for a child who is struggling with addiction. We won't speak of the intense frustration we feel in trying to care for a spouse, a parent, or a loved one. We won't speak of the deep loneliness we are lost in due to grief, a broken marriage, or just the way life has become. We won't speak of the significant pain we are in, fearful of appearing weak or broken in comparison to everyone else who seems to have it "all together."

And yet here, in this space and time, Jesus says to us: "Let it go. Bring your brokenness to me. Lay down the burdens you are carrying. And listen. Listen to my words of grace, redemption, and hope."

Just as he taught in the synagogue, just as he healed the man with the unclean spirit, Jesus is present in our worship, and is healing our broken spirits. As we sing the songs of faith, our voices are raised to the one who created us. As we hear the scriptures read and proclaimed, we are reminded of God's omnipresent care through generation after generation. As we pray individually and as a community, we are drawn closer to God through his only Son. We come to worship not to feel better or to leave feeling happy. We come to worship to renew our relationship with the one triune God. We come to worship to be healed by Jesus Christ our Lord. We come to worship to encounter once again the mystery of faith.

What is this? This is the story of our faith. What is this? This is the promise of God's love for a broken, hurting world. What is this? This is our time to listen for God's voice, so that we might live our lives as witnesses to the one who teaches with an authority that amazes, and who restores the afflicted to wholeness.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? We know who you are: the Holy One of God."

Thanks be to God. Amen.