

Today's second reading comes from the gospel according to Mark, Chapter 1, verses 21-28. Listen for God's word to you this day:

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, 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.

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

We are still in Chapter 1 of Mark and have already learned a lot about Jesus. Prior to this first teaching from Jesus he was baptized, spent time in the wilderness, called his first few disciples to join in him in his ministry, and has set off to demonstrate his authority, to make himself known to his people, all people, God's people.

As Mark says, "when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught." Jesus had a plan, in some ways it seems like a calculated plan, a planned

demonstration of power and authority, not of self, but of God in self. He is enacting a demonstration of sorts. A non-violent, non-aggressive assertion of authority that leaves those gathered both scratching their heads and looking at one another with puzzlement.

The “they” who hear Jesus’ teaching is unclear, but we can assume it is at least his disciples and most likely all the people of Capernaum who are Jewish. And, as the text tells us “they” are “astounded at his teaching” because “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

We don’t know the exact content of what he was teaching, the content doesn’t seem to be Mark’s main focal point here. Mark is trying to relate to the reader that Jesus taught in a way that stood out from the teaching of the law, it did not change the law, or dismiss the law, but what we will come to know later about Jesus tells us his teachings were a reminder of the essence of the law, love. This teaching quickly gives Jesus an opportunity to put into action what his teachings truly mean, what love as the essence of the law look like in action.

Just as Jesus is teaching there is a man with an unclean spirit, who in hearing his teaching cries 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.” How many times have you heard this story and heard the man with the unclean spirit described as someone with mental illness? I would suggest that this person’s identity goes beyond that of his mental well-being and that the suggestion that the unclean spirit is what we have come to know as mental illness is limited in scope. What seems to fit more appropriately and take into account the fullness of the context and it’s continuous application to us today is

a recognition of how the word unclean is used in scripture. In various translations this word unclean is also impure, which in biblical terms means simply: contrary to the sacred.¹

So here we are in Jesus' first outing of his ministry where he is asserting himself with authority and there is a challenger. How Jesus responds is exactly the point of Jesus' authority. "Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'" Jesus is speaking to the unclean spirit, to the part of the man that is challenging Jesus, not to the whole man. It does not say Jesus rebuked the man and sent him out or Jesus rebuked the man and taught the others why he was so bad. No, it says Jesus addressed the part that was contrary to God, contrary to the sacred, and called *it* out of the man.

As Jesus calls the part that is contrary to the sacred out of the man, Jesus does so with a firm, authoritative tone, and at the same time Jesus never once shows condemnation toward the man. Jesus calls that which is contrary to the sacred: the hate, the bigotry, the misogyny, fear, racism, any form of evil that separates the whole person from God, out of the person, so that the separation no longer exists.

In Jesus' first act as teacher, he both speaks with authority and acts with love. Speaking with authority, for Jesus does not mean condemnation, it means returning to the essence of all that has always been, it means returning to love.

Jesus' presence is for the very purpose of naming, calling out, and sending out those parts of us that have become contrary to the sacred. The concept of evil is hard for most of us to digest, which is why I think it helps for us to reframe that word with the

¹ Ortega, Ofelia. Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1. 310.

phrase: contrary to the sacred. We may not be able to admit we have evil within us, but I believe we might be able to more easily admit that we have parts within us that are contrary to the sacred, contrary to what God wants for us, parts that go against what we know deep within is God's will for us and for all of God's creation.

Often times we justify or rationalize what is seen as evil behavior, or expressions of thoughts saying things like "they must not know God" or "they clearly don't go to church"...but here we have the perfect example of how it is possible to know God, to identify the holy presence of God before you, and still walk in the church, still be part of the community. The man with the unclean spirit, the one who is often seen as separate from the worshippers because of what we have come to identify as mental illness, is in truth each of us. At the very heart of this text we find ourselves in whatever forms we have allowed that which is contrary to the sacred to find a home within us.

This text begs of us to question ourselves, what parts of us are keeping us separate from God? Which parts of us have us challenging Jesus' authority? And, are we willing to have those called out of us, so that we may know Jesus more closely, so that there is not one thing within us that is contrary to the sacred? I would be willing to bet even when we do say yes to that transformation we still have a lifetime of work ahead of us. This life with Jesus for the people in Mark is just beginning and, in a sense, it is beginning anew for us. Morning by morning.

Journeying with Jesus is a constant revelation and learning of who Jesus is and what God is trying to tell us through Jesus, and it takes us, like it took those literally journeying with Jesus, like it took Jesus, to the cross. So, here we are in what is commonly referred to as ordinary season and more recently been deemed epiphany

season where we are having Jesus revealed to us, where Jesus with authority is showing us where we have lost our way, and reminding us that it is love that God wants us to return to.

It's important to note that this life of faith is a journey and it's why we revisit Jesus' ministry and God's story for us each week. It would be great if epiphany were a one-time event, if we did have the mystery of God revealed to us all at once but that is not the case. So for today it's enough to ask what are the unclean spirits within me? What are the things that are embedded within my being that do not serve me well, that do not serve the world well, and most of all do not honor our creator well? How is God calling me back to love? And, will I allow Jesus to name those ways within me that are contrary to the sacred so that I may follow him to the cross?