

Please, Release Me!

Feb. 1, 2009

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Mk. 1:21-28

I'm glad you came to church today. You didn't *have* to come today. Attendance is no longer *compulsory*; although it is highly recommended. In fact, medical researchers are finding that a high correlation exists between church attendance and good health and longevity. When I was a boy growing up in Burlington, church was about the only game in town on Sundays, so if you went anywhere on Sunday church was about the only place to go. Nowadays, of course, we have a whole range of options. In the secular world out there Sunday looks just like the other six days of the week. So, I'm glad you came today. You could be home getting the bean dip and nachos ready for tonight's big game.

I can remember *another* difference from my boyhood and now. On most Sundays, after church my family gathered at my grandparents' home for a leisurely home cooked meal. I can still smell the fried chicken, green beans, baked sweet potatoes, and fried cornbread just *thinking* about it! After the meal, the kids usually ran around the back yard while the adults talked about religion and politics and other things that matter around the table or on the back porch. Life seemed to be a lot simpler and slower then; people spent not only *quality* time with each other but *quantity* time too. It seemed like a much easier time to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. We were not pulled in so many different directions. We seemed to have a lot more time for rest and reflection; more time to build relationships and community.

I

Maybe that is why the psalm says, "Be *still* and know that I am God." Maybe that is why you came to church today – to be *still*, to hear a word from the Lord. Maybe you came for a word of hope and encouragement in a world that sure could use some right now. In our New Testament lesson today Jesus must have reassured the people who came to hear him teach in the synagogue. I suspect those people wrestled with problems similar to ours: job security, bills to pay, taxes, a house to keep clean and maintain, children to care for and educate; problems at work, at school, homework, overtime, and never enough time in the day to get everything done. At least they didn't have to worry about the computer crashing or the cell phone battery going dead, or global warming. On the other hand, they had chop wood if they wanted to cook or be warm and walk to school six miles in the snow!

In any event, into the synagogue on the Sabbath walks this young rabbi from Nazareth, named Jesus, who began to deliver a message about God in a manner they had never heard or

seen. They said, “This guy isn’t like the scribes; he speaks with such *authority*.” Now, if you have ever seen Michael Jordan play basketball, or Tiger Woods play golf, or Philip Rivers throw a football, or Yo Yo Ma play cello, then you know what they were talking about. People like that have a rare combination of talent, self-confidence, intelligence, focus, determination, and charisma. And when they do what they do, people are amazed, awestruck, and often scratch their head with envy and disbelief! Call it the Wow factor. Call it what you like, but obviously Jesus had all the right stuff. When he spoke people *listened*, and usually someone’s life got radically transformed.

Interestingly, Mark doesn’t tell us *what* Jesus taught that day in the synagogue, just that the people were *astonished* at his teaching and at the authority with which he taught. They were not the only ones. Somehow a man possessed with an unclean spirit got past the ushers and came in. People like that were not allowed in the synagogue. And when the demon heard Jesus he shouted “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.” This must have been some kind of multiple personality disorder, because the text keeps switching from singular to plural pronouns.

Jesus didn’t fool around with this demon or engage him in a theological discussion; he immediately *rebuked* it and commanded it to come out of the man. And so it did with a loud voice, causing the man to have convulsions, which probably sent the fainthearted running for the exits. The fact that Jesus could exorcise demons amazed them even more, and so word spread pretty quickly that there was a new rabbi town, and he was the real deal. That kind of news travels pretty fast.

But Jesus didn’t hang around to take questions at coffee hour. The text says immediately he left the synagogue and went to Peter and Andrew’s house. But there was to be no rest for the weary. When he got there, he discovered that Peter’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever. So he went to her and healed her and she got out of bed and served them dinner. Now a *cynic* would say Jesus had an ulterior motive behind his kind act for the cook of the house, but I would suggest that Jesus was so full of love and compassion that he healed people wherever he went.

In fact, the next few verses say that people from all over town brought their sick friends and relatives to Peter’s house, and Jesus healed them. He embodied the good news that God’s love and grace were so powerful that they could overcome the power that demons and disease have over people. When Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God was at hand he meant that the present evil age in which people lived was coming to an end. Yes, there was new kid in town, and things were going to *change*.

## II

The people in the synagogue were *amazed* at Jesus powers, but at that point they probably just thought he was a miracle worker and didn't understand that he was the Messiah, the Son of God. But, the demons did. They recognized who Jesus was, and that's why they were afraid of him; they knew the powers of God. And they knew that the jig was up for them. You see, evil can reside in our lives only when God is *not* there. They fill the spiritual void in our lives. But when we invite the spirit of God into our lives, there is no room for the other addictions and idolatries that live there.

This is another way of saying that Jesus isn't interested in just our *religious* life. He wants our *whole* lives. We tend to *compartmentalize* religion as one facet of our lives; but Jesus taught that religion becomes a whole new way of life. God's love transforms us from a self-centered life without God to a life focused on loving God and others. As I like to say, grace changes us from being selfish to *otherish*.

Jesus spoke with such authority, because he *had* authority. *God* had *authorized* him to teach the good news of the gospel. When God called Moses to go lobby Pharaoh to let God's people go, Moses asked "whom shall I say sent me?" And God answered, tell them "I am who I am" sent you. That was authority enough. We often fail to speak with such authority, forgetting that God has called us too to be *witnesses* to the power of God's love and grace. Buddy Ennis learned this when he a young Presbyterian pastor in downtown Atlanta. A clean cut, well dressed, articulate man named Andy came to see him at church one day and asked Buddy to give him a blessing. Andy told Buddy that he had the devil on his back and that he needed a blessing to get him off. Buddy didn't exactly know how to handle this, but Andy insisted that he needed a blessing. So Buddy reluctantly prayed a prayer that was essentially a Presbyterian blessing. He half expected Andy to ask him for money, a place to stay or some similar request that most people off the street asked him on a regular basis. But after the prayer, Andy just stood up and said "thank you" and walked out of his office, apparently with the devil off his back. (P.C. Ennis,,p. 312, *Feasting on the Word*, WJK Press, 2008)

We *underestimate* the power of God's love to exorcise evil and to transform people's lives. Thirty years ago when I was young associate pastor in downtown Boston, we had a young woman who had been in and out of psychiatric care and she could exhibit some very strange and inappropriate behavior at the most inconvenient times. We will call her *Susan*, not her real name. One Sunday morning in worship while the senior minister, Jim Crawford, was preaching, Susan started talking to herself in a rather loud and disruptive voice on the third row. Jim had

three options: he could ignore her and try to preach over her loud voice, which was not a real option; he could nod to the ushers in the back who could come remove her from the sanctuary (which they teach you in usher boot camp); or option number three, which he decided to take.

Jim stopped preaching, looked down at her from the pulpit, and said in a gentle, sincere voice, “Susan, we are glad that you are here today to worship with us, and I want to remind you that God loves you and that you are welcome here in God’s house.” Susan suddenly got very quiet, began to relax, and then sat back in the pew and listened to the rest of the sermon. It was incredible. He had cast out her demon right there before God and everybody! Jim Crawford preached that day with *authority*, and we were all *amazed*.

### III

The word of God goes forth and it does not return *empty*; it creates life, it expunges evil, it holds us accountable to truth and justice, it forgives us of our sins and transforms us into new creatures. It has authority. The Rev. John Wesley, an Anglican priest who was tired and weary from his missionary journeys to America, reluctantly attended a church meeting on Aldersgate St. in London in May of 1738 and heard a sermon on Luther’s lecture on Paul’s Letter to the Romans. It changed life; he suddenly felt that Christ had died for his sins. That preacher must have preached with authority that night. It helped to create the United Methodist Church (William Willimon, p. 23, *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 37, no. 1, Logos Productions, 2009).

Blaise Pascal, one of the greatest mathematicians and philosophers in history tried his best to think and reason his way to faith in God without success. He spent his whole life trying to make sense out of the Bible. Then late in the night on Nov. 23, 1654, he wrote in his diary, “Fire! God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob – not the God of the philosophers and the learned. Certitude! Joy! Peace! God of Jesus Christ!” One of the world’s greatest conversions, not exactly cool, calm, or cerebral, but full of emotion, passion and astonishment. (Ibid.)

Will Willimon tells the story about himself as young pastor who handed out forms to his parishioners to get feedback on his sermons. He became disillusioned when many had written down ideas that were not even in his sermon. Discouraged, he discussed this with a wise woman in his church. She replied, “Where did you get the idea that s sermon is about ideas? Everybody knows that the purpose of a sermon is to meet Jesus and to be amazed that he hasn’t given up on us yet!” Indeed. Maybe we shouldn’t be as awed and amazed by the miracles of Jesus as much as that God still loves us as much as he does and is willing to forgive us for the stupid, selfish things we have done. That’s the real miracle! (Ibid.)

This I know. When Jesus stood up that day to preach, he preached with *authority*, which astonished the people who heard him. It was unlike anything they had ever seen or heard. And that was before he cast out any demons or performed any miracles. For the *real* miracle that day was the good news that God had sent his only Son into the world so that anyone who believed in him would not perish but have eternal life – and in the meantime, this side of heaven, we would have a whole new life, and have it abundantly. No wonder they were amazed. And so are we. So are we. Let us pray.