

THE EXORCISM COMMISSION

Mark 1.21-28

January 28, 2018 (Annual Meeting Sunday)

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TEXT: Mark 1.21-28 (*The Inclusive Language Bible*)

They came to Capernaum, and on the Sabbath, Jesus entered the synagogue and began to teach. The people were spellbound by the teaching, because Jesus taught with an authority that was unlike their religious scholars.

Suddenly a person with an unclean spirit appeared in their synagogue. It shrieked, “What do you want from us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!”

Jesus rebuked the spirit sharply: “Be quiet! Come out of that person!” At that the unclean spirit convulsed the possessed one violently, and with a loud shriek it came out.

All who looked on were amazed. They began to ask one another, “What is this? A new teaching, and with such authority! This person even gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey him!” Immediately the news of Jesus spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

SERMON: *The Exorcism Commission*

Last Sunday, Dr. Patricia Hunter said: “When you hear the call to follow the way of Jesus, the answer is ... YES!”

This morning, we are exploring what it means for us as a “community of faith” to say “yes” to the way of Jesus.

And, in fact, the gospel of Mark is the story of how our ancestors said “yes.”

On a Sabbath morning, Jesus goes into the synagogue in Capernaum and began to teach. So, following the way of Jesus has something to do with teaching. It means that we have folks in our life together who help us learn.

And if it is true that Jesus was not just *any* teacher but, a spellbinding and powerful teacher, then I guess, Adult Learning Commission, you have your work cut out for you. I know it may be hard to get up on a Sunday morning and head off to church but we do it because teaching and learning is a way that we say what? We say YES! to the way of Jesus.

Later in Mark [9.33-37], the friends of Jesus are fighting over who is the greatest, and Jesus takes a little child and puts the child right in the middle of them and says: “Whoever welcomes one of these little ones, welcomes me.” So the work the Children, Families, and Young Adult Commission does of welcoming little ones and their families into our life together is not just a demographic strategy. It’s is the spiritual practice of putting, right at the center of our life together, the wisdom of little ones. It’s following the way of Jesus. And to that, we say ... YES!

Jesus had some place to go that Sabbath morning to learn and to teach and to worship because it was somebody’s job to make sure the synagogue was there and it was ready for people to gather. And so the work we do as the Worship Commission and the Stewardship Commission and the Church Home Operations Commission is following the way of Jesus.

I will remind you that Jesus had a lot to say about houses of worship – about how they could be misused and how they could betray the very presence they testify about. You remember the story of Jesus going into the Temple in Mark 11 and overturning the tables of the moneychangers and crying out: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people!” In other words, doing our best to make this a place of financial integrity and welcome and a place of prayer for all people is not just a matter of being responsible and politically correct. It is following the way of Jesus. “My house,” Jesus says, “shall be a house of prayer for all people.” And to that, we say ... YES!

You remember from last week that when we meet Jesus at the beginning of this story, he is interacting with fisher-folk who are doing their work. And it is in that work, that Jesus calls them. So the work we do as a Personnel Commission, is the work of tending our call. And it's the work of helping one another – not just the staff – understand our lives in the context of what it means for each of us to follow the way of Jesus. It is also the work Membership and Engagement does so that when we hear that call to follow Jesus, we say ... YES!

According to Mark, Jesus is a healer and so the work our Community Nurse, Sue Ross, does and the work we all do to care for one another and to support each is following the way of Jesus.

And, in the process of that healing work in the world, Jesus sometimes got into trouble for hanging out with the wrong crowd. That's some of the healing work Outreach Commission does.

But Outreach, I think, has another task as well. It's the work of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7 who confronts Jesus with his own blindness about the wideness of his own mission in the world. She begs Jesus to cast out the demon who is debilitating her daughter and Jesus says to this Gentile woman: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Nevertheless, she persisted. And Jesus learned something that day from her about himself and something about his mission in the world.

The work we do together as an act of outreach, is not just about the healing we may be part of in the world. It's about the healing we have to do among ourselves to understand our own limitations and to be challenged by the limitless possibilities of that power already at work in us to accomplish far more than any of us can ask or imagine. And to that power, we say ... YES!

And then there is music. If you ask the crowd that followed the way of Jesus on that Palm Sunday morning [Mark 11] what it means to follow

the way of Jesus, no doubt they would sing their answer: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God.” Or if you asked the friends of Jesus how they coped with the message of that last supper together, they would remind you that “when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” [Mark 14.26].

The great African-American writer, Langston Hughes said once that: “Music explains things better than words.” And so, when we sing together in celebration or sing together in sorrow, we are following that better way of the Word-made-flesh. We are following the way of Jesus. And to that, we say ... YES!

Now all that is great. But by now you might be asking yourself: If this morning is about all the ways that we say “yes” to the way of Jesus, whose job is it to cast out demons? Where is the exorcism commission?

That’s where the story is headed this morning. Jesus casts out that “unclean Spirit” that violently possesses this person in the synagogue. And to that we say ... Yes?

Professor Michael Raschko over at Seattle University has written a little book on Mark and he says that: “Exorcism seems to have become the domain of Hollywood, and Christian congregations rarely feel the need for an exorcism, much less actually experience one.”

I understand Hollywood is making new sequels to *The Exorcist* movie. God knows why. One was plenty. But there does seem to be an ongoing fascination with exorcism.

And, tragically, there religious folks who take exorcisms literally. I read a story of a 23 year old Romanian Orthodox nun whose convent became convinced that she was possessed. In an attempt at exorcism, “they tied her to a cross, pushed a towel into her mouth and left her alone without food or water. She died after three days.” Officials believe she was schizophrenic.

There have been recent stories about children who are killed by their parents because the parents believe their children to be gay.

So I realize that any meaningful conversation about this story is at a disadvantage because of those connections.

But I wonder if there may be something deeper that makes us very uncomfortable with this story – something that has to do with control.

We don't want to believe that we could lose control of our own lives. We may know better than to live in the fantasy that we can control everything but we hope to control some things. And the idea that something else might take control of our lives is frightening.

Ask people living with an addiction what it's like to be possessed by something. Ask people trapped in domestic violence. Think about what it must be like to be haunted by memories you can't escape or to be chronically defined by other people's perceptions of "disability." Think about all those folks in our economy who are imprisoned by debt. Or just think about the times this last year that you have felt totally obsessed by and completely powerless over the political reality of our country.

Perhaps we know something of what it means to be possessed.

That may be true even of the everyday things we own. Perhaps there is a reason why those things are called "possessions." They possess us as much we possess them. We can live in fear of losing them and be overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for them.

And, ironically, it seems like sometimes there are those who meet the fear of being possessed by giving up control of their lives to an outer – perhaps institutional – authority. They hand over control of their lives to a charismatic leader or to a religious system that demands complete and unquestioning loyalty.

That's the kind of authority the people in that synagogue in Capernaum knew.

And the thing that amazes them is that Jesus exercises another kind of authority. He has another kind of teaching. Michael Raschko says that this story at the beginning of Mark's gospel is intended to show that "Jesus has defeated what seems to possess us and trap us in patterns that destroy life [so that] we are free."

Maybe you noticed that line in the hymn Rod Romney wrote about *this place*:

*Here to challenge all oppression, all injustice, wrong and greed;
Here to offer all compassion, see our wounded spirits freed.*

He was writing about this place. He was writing about us.

Exorcism isn't dramatic movie-making or misguided religion. It is exercising a different kind of spiritual power that sets people free.

It's the co-worker – and friend -- who saw the bruises that day at work several years ago and wouldn't let me go home one more night to an abusive relationship.

It's the teacher that exercises the power not to give students answers but frees their minds to think and to imagine and to wonder.

It's the community that exercises its spiritual power in teaching and learning and worship and caring and engaging so that people are free to be the blessing they are.

It's following the way of Jesus. And to that, we say ... YES!

Because, on this Annual Meeting Sunday, we have a choice to make. We could use this Sunday to simply acknowledge our organizational units and assert the institutional authority of each one.

Or we could commit ourselves to be exorcists we are called to be who use our spiritual power to set people free – free to love themselves, free to love each other, free to love the world. So that one day, with Dr. King, we can say: “Free at last; free at last; thank God almighty; we’re free at last!”

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES:

Michael Raschko, *A Companion to the Gospel of Mark* (2003: Twenty-Third Publications), p.23.