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Who's Your Authority?
Mark 1:21-28

*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 ^[m] commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*

In the Gospel of Mark, this is the **INAUGURAL event** of Jesus' ministry.

In Matthew, it is the Sermon on the Mount.

In Luke, it is Jesus preaching from Isaiah in the synagogue.

In John, it is his miracle of water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

But for Mark—this is it. An exorcism. A show of Jesus' power and authority.

This event sets up a sharp **CONTRAST** between Jesus and the scribes.

Jesus teaches as one with authority, not as the scribes.

Which is strange, because the scribes were the religious authorities, well versed in the law and likely people who lived by the letter of that law!

So why does Mark make a point to say **Jesus' authority is better?**

Because this event is an **identification** of Jesus—

his baptism identified him as the Son of God, by the voice of God.

This time he is identified as the Holy One of God, by the voice of a **demon!**

Can you even **imagine this scene?**

The synagogue service begins as usual, with Jesus teaching,

Everyone is probably quiet and paying attention,

And suddenly, this possessed man shows up!
 And not only is this man possessed—but the demon speaks, directly to Jesus!
 In fact, the **demon knows** who Jesus is,
 even more than those in the synagogue!

Which is a **THEME** throughout the Gospel of Mark—
 people are amazed by Jesus,
 but they usually **don't understand** who he is!
 It is the demons in Mark that correctly identify him as the Son of God!

Which reminds us that sometimes **those on the outside**,
 those we shun or ignore,
 are the very people who really understand God, and what's going on!
 Sometimes the people we consider 'crazy' have the knowledge!

And ideally, **CHURCH** is a place where the **crazy people are welcome**.
 And, isn't that good news?
 It means **WE are welcome** in the church!

There are 13 healings in the Gospel of Mark,
 And **4 involve Jesus casting** out demons!

Why is that important?

I wonder if it has to do with the **kind of power** Jesus brings in his ministry.
 The power of Jesus is different than other religious leaders.
 The gospel says *They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*²³

So, what does it **mean that Jesus has the power** to cast out demons?
 And **his authority**, was not like the scribes?

Well, let's think about what **healing means** to the man with the unclean spirit---
 You know, casting out this man's demon---means bringing him **wholeness**.
 It makes him **clean** again---where he can be in **relationship** with his family,
 the community, he can come back to worship.

Jesus' power and authority ultimately came from **LOVE**.

The scribes and Pharisees were so concerned about God's *law*,
 But not always as concerned about *God's love*.
 When Jesus healed people—*he was showing God's love*.

And what was really happening with someone demon possessed?
 Not everyone agrees on what possession in the Bible *really is*.
 Some say we're dealing with the first century equivalent of *mental illness*.
 Some say it is the realm of the *demonic*, and Satan.

Well, I can't say for sure what was happening with this man.
 But I do believe there are demons in this world.
 There is a Devil, the Bible wisely calls him our Adversary.
 And I think that the *spiritual realm of human life is real*, and important.
 I may not understand it all, but I believe it exists.

And I think just when we are trying to follow Jesus,
 And listening to God—when things seem to be going well,
 that is so often the time *we are hit hard* by all that is not good.
 That can be the very time that evil comes knocking at our door.

In my *Streams in the Desert* devotional earlier this month,
 The author spoke about how just when we receive something worthwhile from
 God, that is often the time the Enemy of God comes to destroy us!
 Just like when David was anointed king,
 that's when the Philistines suddenly set out to kill him.

The good news is that *power is developed through resistance*---
 So when we come up against the evil in this world,
 it develops our spiritual muscles!

Has that ever been *true in your life*?
 I know it has in mine!
 I don't like this truth of Christian life,
 but experiencing it has made me stronger.
 I think the same is true for the church.

I don't think it's any coincidence that **Jesus' ministry begins** with his baptism and God calling him the Beloved...
 and **right after that** he is led into the wilderness for 40 days of testing with Satan.
 Talk about developing his spiritual muscle!
That was his preparation for his public ministry.
 And here, in Capernaum, he puts **his power and authority to the test**.
 And look what happens!

You know, I've always liked what theologian C.S. Lewis says about demons....
 he says that we should **neither ignore them**,
 or give them too much attention!
 His little book called **The Screwtape Letters**, is a humorous and serious look at this
 often ignored realm of the Christian life.
 The book is letters from Satan to a junior demon, on how to attack Christians.
 Sounds crazy, but it's a delightful book, and so true about the life of faith.

When it comes to understanding the spiritual realm,
 And people possessed by demons,
 I think that **'demons' can be more** than just little guys running around in red
 suits....I mean we can all be possessed by things other than God, right?

Ever **felt like** something was **weighing you down, or holding you hostage**?
 That's what I'm talking about!

Whatever was wrong with this man in Mark,
 we know that this man was **deemed crazy** by everyone around him.
 And he was **unclean**—unfit for life in the community, especially for worship.
 He was an outsider, a marginalized person who was ostracized, by everyone—
 much like severely mentally ill people living on the streets are today.

But it was **this man**, with an unclean spirit, who **KNEW Jesus'** identity!
 Sometimes the disciples don't even understand who Jesus is,
 but the demons sure do!

This power of **LOVE**, this **AUTHORITY** of Jesus is SO important for us today,
 Because we live in a very crazy world.

Right now we are living in a **triple THREAT** of suffering, pain, and chaos—the COVID pandemic, racial injustice and political division.
Which can make us feel a little crazy, right?

But we learn something **from Jesus about dealing with craziness**.
Sometimes we give into the crazy voices because they are the loudest.
Or we just ignore them.
Jesus didn't ignore this demon or give into it.

Jesus speaks truth and freedom---directly to the demons!

Be silent, and come out of him!

This is how Jesus delivers the man from the possession,
By casting out all that was hurting him.

After this exorcism **the man is no longer an outsider**, or unclean.

Jesus gives him a whole new life!

And in the process, people watching this see that Jesus means business.

His authority and power is literally the power of God.

The power of LOVE.

They realize that Jesus has the ability to bring
truth freedom, deliverance, and restoration.

Isn't that the same power that Jesus has in our lives today???

Freedom? Deliverance? Restoration? True relationship?

What does that mean to you? What does that mean for us?

As we battle COVID, and racial injustice, and the political divide?

What if it means that **none of that has any power over us**,

None of those demons can dictate our lives,

None of it can hold us hostage?

The only **true power over us is the power and authority of Jesus Christ!**

Which is a power that frees, and restores, and puts us in right relationship!

Which is pretty **life-changing**.

So, what if Jesus was our ONE true authority?

What if ***His voice was louder*** than all the rest?
 What would that mean for us?

I was thinking about that this week, and wondering—
 how does that ***look practically*** in our everyday lives?
 Does it look a lot different than the way we currently live?

Right now ***we listen to lots of loud and sometimes CRAZY voices***.
 We listen to news 24/7, on social media, the internet, television, our phones.
 We easily get sucked into the most extreme forms of that—
 the Fox or MSNBC world in all its bias...
 Or the ‘news’ of Facebook, which is just people’s opinion.
 Or the ‘news’ that comes up on our phones, which is also run by algorithms
 that send us more of the stuff we already read and like.

It is ***very hard to find TRUTH today***.
 But as followers of Jesus Christ, that is our mission.

So HOW can we do this?

What if we have to ***hold up all the other voices to the litmus test of Scripture?***
 Does what we are hearing and believing stand up to the Word?
 A simple question might be—does this ***help me love God or neighbor?***
 Does this build up, or tear down?
 Does this bring freedom or captivity?
 Does it inspire love or hate?

Another test might be—***what would Jesus say about this voice?***
 This supposed authority?
 Would he agree? Would he encourage following this person or position?

And practically speaking—
 Are we seeing the ***complexities*** of each situation and issue,
 or are we wearing our own rose-colored glasses,
 or trying to justify our own opinion or bias?
 Are we able to ***see beyond sound bites*** and mis-characterizations,
 to really hear and listen to voices that are different?
 Are we giving other perspectives a chance?

Jesus certainly gave this man a chance by not ignoring him,
Or kicking him out of the synagogue!
(which is likely what we would do if he showed up in church today!)

And finally, what if sometimes the **best solution is for us to just STOP.**
To put down our computer, our television, even our phones.
And **open our hearts and ears to the One voice** we need most.

It's so hard to hear from Jesus when we are bombarded by other voices,
especially loud and crazy ones.

And in order to **know Jesus' voice**, we have to continually listen for it.
And **learn** what he said, what he did,
so that when we hear Him, **we KNOW it's him!**

We all need **more time in the WORD, and in PRAYER.**
And less time in media.

Because when we tune-in to God,
we receive the kind of power and authority that is life-changing.
That's when **we can be delivered** from the demons that weigh us down—
all that holds us hostage—fear, regret, hate, greed, jealousy, grudges—
everything that puts chains around our hearts.

Friends, that is the **GOOD NEWS of the Gospel** today:
Who is our authority?
Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God, our Lord and Savior.
May we **listen and follow HIS voice** above all others.
And for his voice, all God's people say, Amen.