

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus is in it

Made whole by Jesus voice of teaching and authority

A number of years ago Clara Hughes, speed skater and cyclist, started an initiative with Bell called "Let's Talk." It takes the form of a day where texting helps to raise funds for mental health programs. It is also a day to raise awareness of mental health issues and hopefully, over the long term, remove the stigma that so many face when it come to mental illness. In fact, the next Bell "Let's Talk" day is on Jan 31.

For many it was a surprise to find out that Clara, a six-time Olympic Summer and Winter medalist, struggled with depression. In recent years a number of well known individuals have spoken about their struggles with mental health, including more recently, Prince Harry of the Royal family.

People were completely taken aback and saddened when comedian Robin Williams died and it was revealed that he had been struggling with depression. Who could have imagined that someone who brought so much joy and laughter in to the world was so distraught that he committed suicide.

Depression has been a part of my experience as well. Something I have shared before. For eight years, after the birth of my youngest son, the world seemed a very unhappy and dark place with no hope for change.

So it is with knowledge of many who live with mental health issues, along with the information in this modern era that we have regarding mental health and its many challenges, that we come to a passage about Jesus casting a demon out of a man. Now, there is no way for us to know what was going on for this person. What we are aware of is that at Jesus' command, things changed. The man was healed in a very dramatic way, and there was a whole synagogue of people there to witness the moment.

Turns out this was no ordinary day in worship. Although people arrived much the same as each of us do on a Sunday morning with our concerns, our desires, having had breakfast. For some getting the kids ready to come, for others just glad to have the energy to get out of bed and get dressed. And worship started out much like it would have any other Sabbath, but then this guy gets up and starts to teach.

The fact that Jesus stood up to speak was not so unusual. Guests teachers and rabbis had always had a place to share their knowledge in worship at Synagogue. What was unusual was the authority that was evident in Jesus' teaching. We can't know what it was that made Jesus special in that moment, but Mark writes, that "They were

astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (v22). In other words, there was something in his manner, in his voice, in his very presence that made people pay attention. And it seems to have riled up one person in particular. Someone who, up to that moment, had gone unnoticed.

The man, with what is described as “an unclean spirit,” cried out at Jesus’ teaching, “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” (v23-24).

Now the man had everyone’s attention. Think of it, someone coming in here, sitting quietly in the pews and then suddenly shouting out those kinds of words as I preach. You would all be looking at me to figure out what I might do, maybe the ushers would quietly come forward and see if they could settle the person down or escort them out. At times I have seen some of you get a little tense when someone chooses to come in with a hoodie and sits down quietly for worship, let alone moving at all.

In the scripture Jesus rebukes the man saying “Be silent, and come out of him! And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice came out of him.”

For a second time Mark writes about the congregation’s reaction, this time after the incident with the man, “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” (v27).

There are a few things that are relevant for us in this very short passage. The first is that Jesus was recognized immediately as someone who taught, but not only that, Jesus taught with authority. People witnessed this event. It was felt, heard, and seen. It must have been a truly powerful, if not scary, moment.

Another point is that whatever was going on in this man with the unclean spirit, Jesus was willing and had the ability to take it on and deal with it. To be unclean in those ancient times meant that your relationships with family and friends were not whole.

There were a lot of rules about touching unclean people and how long it would be before you could be with others, or worship when you had to deal with things like the dead, sickness, women with their periods because blood was considered unclean. And unlike today when we seem to think that we can do life on our own terms, we don’t need anyone else - people in Ancient Israel, and other cultures of the time, recognized their interdependence.

We know as the stories of Jesus continue in all the Gospels, that Jesus spent most of his time with the very people that others neglected, forgot about, or didn’t care about. Those who had no power, no prestige, nothing to give in return.

Now we may not think of ourselves as unclean or having anything in our lives that could help us relate to the man with the unclean spirit, but it may be that there are things going on for us that can help bridge that a little.

This story, as almost every story in the Bible, is about relationships, about brokenness. Right from the beginning, with the story of Adam and Eve taking a bite from the apple of the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Bible has been sharing about the ways in which people's relationship with God and their relationships with one another are in need of redemption. We don't need to look very far to see that families, friends, and people throughout the world, are not doing very well.

But let's focus on ourselves for a moment. Do you have any brokenness in your life? If you answer yes, then Jesus has the power and authority to deal with it. Think about your relationships, think about your health, mental or physical. Think about your life journey, any regrets, wrong doing that you have yet to come to grips with. Jesus is present in it.

We don't have Jesus here standing up to address us, but we do have the Holy Spirit which moves in our lives, bringing to us the power and authority of Jesus available not only as we worship on a Sunday morning, but at every moment of everyday. Think what it would mean if we trusted that Jesus was at work in us – that teaching, that power, that authority changing us.

For Jesus, performing an act such as commanding a demon out of a man, healing another of blindness or a withered hand, or a woman's experience of healing in her body after years of suffering, bringing someone back to life - all of these things that Jesus did were not to bring attention to the miracle itself, but each was a sign used as a teaching moment.

Each miracle had a sermon attached to it in which Jesus could say in some form or other, "I am here to bring life and bring it abundantly. The kingdom of God is drawing near." And in Jesus' coming, the kingdom of God has entered into the world in a new way. Even after more than two thousand years we have this opportunity to live in a way that shows that God is nearer to us than ever, as present as ever.

We have a God that wishes to touch lives, to heal brokenness, to bring wholeness to relationships and to the world. It is not that the world becomes perfect. Even when Jesus healed one person or another, many others in the same town would continue to live with challenges. The point is that Jesus changes how we live in this world, not necessary what we live with.

There is a depth of healing in the soul that can be had even when and as we face struggles. When our bodies are failing, cancer is taking its toll, depression, Alzheimer's, dementia – add to the list your experience of brokenness, when the cheque never covers the basics of food, clothing, or shelter, when a job is lost, or a life is lost, there is a grace, a kind of healing, that Christ can and will bring to it all.

It is a grace, hope, and depth of peace beyond our understanding that comes when we expect that God is willing to be there in it with and for us.

This story of Jesus and the man in the synagogue, is about God showing up in human form, willing to do what it takes to bring life to people in the moment, and beyond to eternal life. The Jesus who showed up in a synagogue, shows up here in this church and in each of our lives. Jesus is teaching and with authority even today. Watch for it, ask for it, expect it and know it.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.