

Wesley United Methodist Church

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Bread, Bath & Beyond

January 28, 2018

Title: Beyond the Boundaries

Scripture: Psalm 111:1-3

Mark 1:21-28

It was a normal sabbath day in the village of Capernaum and the people had gathered as usual. But there was a new teacher there that day and they weren't really sure who he was or what his qualifications were. He was with Simon and Andrew and they were well known in the village, so it was worth giving him a chance and listening to him. It turned out that he was interesting but there was also something about him that was different.

He didn't refer to what Moses or the Rabbis or scholars had said. He interpreted the holy scripture as if he had the authority to do so without relying upon what others thought or said. He was different than the scribes who were recognized as biblical scholars. The scribes would talk about the various interpretations and how they had come to be understood. This man spoke in a way that was unprecedented. They had never heard anyone speak the way that he did. He taught as one who had authority just because of who he was. "They were surprised at his teaching – so forthright, so confident – not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars."ⁱ People were really paying attention now.

And then things became even more interesting. There was a man there; someone that they typically ignored. He was one of them but in many ways, he was also an outsider. There was something different about him, something that today we can't clearly understand. Mark called it an "unclean spirit" but we don't really know exactly what he meant.

But this man was now challenging the speaker, "What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you're up to! You're

the Holy One of God, and you've come to destroy us!"ⁱⁱ They couldn't ignore him anymore. He was disrupting the morning teaching, the morning routine. Jesus, the new teacher, spoke to him, or directly to the spirit – "Be silent, and come out of him!" The spirit came out of the man at once. Again, we really don't know exactly what this means but clearly something amazing happened. Now his teaching had taken on another dimension. The people were amazed.

"Everyone there was incredulous, buzzing with curiosity. 'What's going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and sends them packing!' This "new teaching" was not only words, it was also action. Jesus spoke with a quiet but compelling authority that was all his own. With that same authority, he also spoke words of healing. Jesus came to stop the nightmare. He came to rescue people from the destructive forces that enslaved them.

Mark wants us to know how and why Jesus became so popular so quickly. "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." He attracted large crowds because of his authoritative healings. He taught and acted as one who had authority.

Jesus' authority wasn't about power in the way that we usually think about power. This is not about control or power over someone or something. The Greek word used here, is about a willingness or a right that has everything to do with seeing justice served. Mark wants us to know immediately that this is what Jesus' ministry is about.ⁱⁱⁱ

Over and over in Mark's gospel, we find Jesus healing people – destroying the boundaries, the limitations, that prevented them from living life to its fullest. The law said that healing could take place on the sabbath **only** if it was an emergency, but Jesus saw anything that prevented a

person from living a full life as an emergency – as something that couldn't wait even one more day. In Mark's gospel, Jesus on more than one occasion healed on the sabbath. I think this was another example of Jesus teaching, healing, living with authority.

Jesus has the power to call out the unclean spirits whatever they are. He has the power to call out those things that rage within us, those things that limit our ability to love and to grow, those boundaries that we find impossible to cross.

Mark has been referred to as the Twitter gospel.^{iv} He tells the story as quickly as possible, with little or no embellishment. In Mark's gospel, Jesus doesn't have the time to overexplain his every move – he simply invites people to follow him and to figure out the details later. We've already seen in Mark's gospel that Simon, Andrew, James, and John followed Jesus immediately. Here even the spirits obey him.

Think about the times that you have said, "yes" to Jesus. Think about the times when he has called you to do something. Did it always turn out the way you expected? My guess is no. Generally, when Jesus calls us to something, we are not given the answer to all our questions before we say yes. We have to begin by taking that first step in faith. Only then do we start to see some of the answers; only then do things start to make sense.

When I first believed that God was calling me to parish ministry, it made no sense to me. I could see lots of reasons why it was not the right thing to do. I was sure that God was making a mistake. I wanted to ask, "Have you met me? Do you know anything about me and about what's happening in my life?" But God is persistent. After a small tentative "maybe", and a first step, I started to discover that the mountains that I

thought I saw were becoming small hills, things that could be overcome, things that were not so big, not so insurmountable.

I could never have imagined how rewarding it would be to be a pastor. I have learned what a privilege it is to be invited into the sacred times in someone's life, to sit with someone struggling with a difficult decision, to walk with someone in the last days of their earthly life.

I've had more than one person tell me that when they agreed to teach a Sunday School class, they never could have seen how much they would gain from it, what it would mean to them, how wonderful it would be. People who serve food in a food pantry or tutor a child or help teach an adult how to read English as a second language frequently talk about what a blessing it was to them. People visiting residents in a nursing home may find that the stories that residents share have a profound impact on them.

As in Mark's gospel, Jesus doesn't always take the time to explain things to us in advance. That's not a bad thing. When we embark upon something new, we might not have the courage to take that first step, if we could see the whole journey ahead of us. God gives us the faith, the courage, the power to do what we are called to do and go where we are called to go, one step at a time. One step at a time, we often discover that the new things are not as difficult as we think they might be when we look at the whole and all the questions we have.

There may be many things that hold us back from fully saying "yes" to God – maybe it is fear of what God will ask us to do. Maybe it is our feeling of inadequacy – that we are not good enough, not capable enough – never quite trusting that God will prepare us and empower us to do what God calls us to do. We set up all different kinds of boundaries that limit us and

prevent us from fully saying “yes” to God and living life to the fullness that God desires for us.

Years ago, I read about a woman expressing her difficulty in saying “yes” to God. She was “expressing to a friend how impossible she found it to say, ‘Thy will be done’ and how afraid she should be to do it. She was the mother of an only little boy, who was the heir to a great fortune, and the idol of her heart. After she had stated her difficulties fully, her friend said, ‘Suppose your little Charley should come running to you tomorrow and say, ‘Mother, I have made up my mind to let you have your own way with me from this time forward. I am always going to obey you, and I want you to do just whatever you think best with me. I will trust your love.’ How would you feel towards him? Would you say to yourself, ‘Ah, now I shall have a chance to make Charley miserable. I will take away all his pleasures and fill his life with every hard and disagreeable thing that I can find. I will compel him to do just the things that are the most difficult for him to do, and will give him all sorts of impossible commands.’”

“‘Oh, no, no, no!’ exclaimed the indignant mother. ‘You know I would not. You know I would hug him to my heart and cover him with kisses and would hasten to fill his life with all that was sweetest and best.’ ‘And are you more tender and more loving than God?’ asked her friend. ‘Ah, no!’ was the reply; ‘I see my mistake. Of course, I must not be any more afraid of saying, ‘Thy will be done,’ to my Heavenly Father than I would want my Charley to be of saying it to me.’”^v

If we have not said a 100% yes to following Jesus, where do we begin? George MacDonald writing in Creation in Christ wrote this, “you can begin at once to be a disciple of the Living One – by obeying him in the first thing you can think of in which you are not obeying him. We must learn to

obey him in everything, and so must begin somewhere. Let it be at once, and in the very next thing that lies at the door of our conscience!^{vi} This is good advice even if we believe that we have said yes 100% because for all of us, there are places where we are not living exactly as God calls us to and are giving up part of the fullness of life that God offers to us.

This is good advice because all around us we can see places where people are being denied the opportunity to experience life at its fullest. We can see places where people are being denied the basic necessities of life. Jesus intervened in the life of the man in the synagoge, healed him and gave him an opportunity for a new life. There are people who need us to speak on their behalf, to stand up for them, to participate in acts of justice, mercy, and love so that they may also experience the fullness of life. What boundaries have we set in our lives that prevent us from being agents of justice and peace of helping to make life better for God's children.

Whatever we think the boundaries are in our life, we can trust them to God.

Mark wants us to know that "the boundary breaking, demon dashing, law transcending Son of God has arrived in the person of Jesus" and he will expect far more than "amazement" from his followers. He will expect us to follow him, to step out in faith and trust. He will expect us to go places and do things that we might not be able to imagine, but God will always prepare us for whatever it is we are being called to be and to do. It will not seem like a drudgery or horrible thing, but rather something that is being fed and watered by a spark of passion within us.

Mark also wants us to know that the forces of evil know the healing power of Jesus' word and that they are not going to be indifferent or submissive.^{vii} Jesus' powerful teaching is not only like fresh air to the

faithful, but it is also disruptive to the presence of evil. It makes evil uncomfortable and frightened because it knows that it is going to be challenged and overcome.

We quickly hear in Mark's gospel that Jesus could not go anywhere without people following him or coming to him for healing. While healing, Jesus was constantly destroying the boundaries, the destructive forces that enslaved people.

From the beginning, the people are confronted with the question – “Who is this man? What do we do about him?” We, too, are confronted with the same question. “Who do we believe Jesus is? What do we do about him?”

Probably more now than at almost any other time, we find ourselves asking who we can trust? Which news sources can we trust? Whose opinions matter to us? How can we tell if someone is speaking the truth? What motivates the actions that we observe? What people or institutions influence our daily decisions for better or worse? And what impact do all these voices around us have on our faith life?^{viii}

Into that crowded circle of influence comes Jesus, the one who spoke and speaks with authority. In the daily barrage of messages that we encounter, what does Jesus have to say to us? How might his words transform the other voices that we must process? What “unclean spirits” might we need to exorcise so that we can fully embody his spirit of love and mercy?

I want to share with you a prayer that I read this week by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, a pastor in our conference.

Let us pray,

God, we do not know what burdens people carry, what demons they wrestle with silently, what triumph it may be for them to appear normal, to be decent, to show up.

Give us compassion for each person, aware that spirits haunt us all. Give us grace to bless and not to judge, to heal and not to hurt, even those who invite hurting. Free us from our own demons, our ego and its demands on ourselves and others.

We do not know another's inner story, its landscape, its dark places, its villains. We don't know; We don't need to know. We only know your tremendous love even for us, and equally for them. Help us remember. Amen.^{ix}

ⁱ The Message, Mark 1:21-28

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word Homiletical Perspective, Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, Year B

^{iv} Abingdon Preaching Annual 2018 1/28/18

^v Job, Rueben P., and Shawchuck, Norman. A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants, The Upper Room, 1983. P.253, quoting: "The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life' by Hannah Whitall Smith.

^{vi} Job, p.60, quoting from "Creation in Christ" by George MacDonald

^{vii} Feasting on the Word, Exegetical and Theological Perspective

^{viii} Abingdon Preaching Annual

^{ix} Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Unfolding Light"