

“Authoritative Teacher” GPPC, 1-28-18
Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28

I come from a family of teachers. My father was a psychology professor, my mother, an elementary school teacher, my sister, a junior and senior high band director, my aunt, an early childhood education specialist. And for two unimpressive years I taught band and music appreciation to unfortunate middle school and high school students. Almost 28 years ago I switched subjects, and here we are.

Growing up in our family, my father was the grammar czar who was still correcting my grammar within just a few years of his death by Alzheimer's. While watching TV my father and mother made a practice of correcting the grammar of newscasters and, heaven help them, sportscasters. It was irritating, but in the long run at least, helpful as well.

These days public school teachers face low salaries, a lack of educational resources, kids who are experiencing trauma, and, of course, the ever-present pressure of standardized testing. It's not easy being a

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public school teacher. So I keep teachers on my prayer list. Maybe you do too.

Mark reminds us that in addition to everything else he is, Jesus is also a teacher and he spends a good portion of his time on earth teaching with astonishing. And let's just say the standardized tests aren't able to measure what he imparts.

If you were here last Sunday, you may recall Jesus has already made a trip down to the Sea of Galilee, run into fisherman, Simon, Andrew, James, and John, and called them to be his first disciples. Today we read that they go to Capernaum, a town situated on the northwest shore. And when the Sabbath comes, they do what people of faith do, they go to the worship space for study and worship. In this case they go to the synagogue. Nothing so unusual so far.

But Jesus begins to teach and here is where things start to get strange. Mark says "they." (We assume "they" means the disciples and whoever else is there.) "They" are "astounded" at the teaching of Jesus, because he teaches them "as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

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As one scholar puts it, the scribes here are “knowledgeable about the proper observance of the Sabbath and the other requirements of the Torah, the law of Moses. After A.D. 70 they became known as rabbis.”

(Douglas R.A. Hare, *Mark*, 28.)

So if the scribes are experts on Mosaic law, why does Mark tell us that Jesus teaches “with authority,” that is with “liberty,” “capability,” and “power,” but the scribes do not?

We don’t know for certain. Mark does not give us a simple explanation. But we can make informed guesses based on the content of the entire gospel, and especially upon what happens next.

Apparently, folks are right in the middle of worship. Maybe Jesus is even mid-sermon. And then there is this man with an “unclean spirit.” “Unclean” here doesn’t mean dirty. Unclean here is a synonym for evil, a spirit that is opposed to God, an enemy of God. This man possessed by an unclean spirit starts yelling right in the middle of church. The unclean spirit says, “What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

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Notice some characteristics of the unclean spirit's hollered master's thesis. "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." First, we note that the unclean spirit sometimes refers to itself in the plural "us" and other times in the singular "I." (The grammar czar would not be amused.) What's going on?

One possibility, according to scholars, is that this unclean spirit is the spokedemon for the all the other evil spirits. "Hey, I may be a demon, but I'm the head demon."

But I wonder if there is a second possibility. Despite phrases such "evil genius," and "criminal mastermind," evil is actually chaotic and unintelligent. By its very nature evil is parasitic, insatiable, and self-destructive, and thus unwilling and unable to maintain appropriate boundaries. So while goodness and love reach out to embrace the other while still retaining appropriate boundaries for self and the other, evil inevitably sinks into a disorganized, bickering, ravenous, hate-filled mess.

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Second, note that the unclean spirit or spirits, (depending on who is running the pronouns this time) knows who Jesus is—the Holy One of God. And not only does the unclean spirit know, but it insists on announcing it. Why?

Think back to the beginning of the Bible and Moses asking God God's name. What does God say in response? "I am who I am" or "I am the One who will be," or it can be translated other ways. But essentially it's also a way of God saying, "My name is none of your business, because you cannot place me into whatever little box you try to construct. I am beyond your owning and defining."

So the unclean spirit has not suddenly toss some compliments to Jesus. In fact, it seeks to name him and thus control him. It wants to do battle with Jesus.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned a recent article about neuroscience and happiness. Not only do researchers recommend responding to destructive thoughts by countering with thanksgiving or attempts at thanksgiving, they also recommend our attempting to name whatever negative feeling we're experiencing. "I'm feeling sad." "I'm angry."

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“I’m lonely.” Naming and identifying which negative feelings we are having is one of the first steps in healing. In fact, clinical counselors help us name the various unhealthy thoughts and thought patterns that are making us ill. And by being able to name what we are dealing with, we are often empowered to exercise some control and experience healing.

The unclean spirit names Jesus and tries to take him on. The strategy doesn’t go well.

Jesus simply says, “Be silent, and come out of him.” It is an exorcism. But there’s no mention of any hard effort on Jesus’ part. He doesn’t have to do anything weird or even work up a sweat. He just says, “Be silent, and come out of him.”

But notice how indeed the unclean spirit comes out—with convulsions and crying with a loud voice. Again, it’s a lesson about the nature of evil, isn’t it? When Jesus commands the evil to leave, it leaves with convulsions and shrieking. When being cast out, the unclean spirit does not say, “Why thank you for the kind suggestion that I mend my wicked ways. I shall endeavor to do so posthaste!” As a general rule, evil does not leave silently.

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If we think that working for what is right, speaking the truth in love, and standing against bigotry is going to be a neat and quiet process, we're kidding ourselves. If we imagine that serving as instruments of God's peace in the world will not expose us to the convulsions of spirits that seek to destroy the environment for a profit or spirits hell-bent on making us doubt our self-worth, we are mistaken. Evil usually does not leave in a quiet and orderly fashion. But this leaves us with an opportunity.

A contemplative Christian says, "Near Tucson in the U.S. desert Southwest, there is a biosphere built twenty years ago and filled with trees and plants. Being sealed from the outside atmosphere, it is sheltered entirely from wind. The trees inside have grown weak and spindly. In a natural setting wind creates strength in the trees as they resist it; and wind helps to spread the seeds.

"When we stay with what comes to us or where we are, we grow only stronger rather than weaker. Endurance asks us to stay put in the face of great struggle: it is the wind strengthening our foundation. Endurance means we have looked suffering in the eye and not run away.

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We might take consolation in knowing the storms fortify us for what is ahead.” (Christine Valters Painter, “The Unraveling Toward Love,” *Weavings XXXI:4*, 7.)

As we struggle against storms of evil, it is an opportunity for us to have our foundation fortified, for us to grow stronger in facing our own personal demons and as well as systemic evils.

And evil does, in fact, leave. It is ultimately cast out by the authoritative teacher, Jesus.

I think we are so steeped in the teaching of Christ that we may sometimes take it for granted. Imagine a world in which people had no clue about God’s teachings in Christ. What if you didn’t know the authoritative teaching of Christ? What if you thought your value as a person were based on your looks, or your intelligence, or how much money you made, or how successful you were? And what if that fell apart?

Or what if somebody asked, “What’s your purpose of life?” And you had no clue. How terrible would that be?

Or what if you thought life were only about self-interest? “I got mine. Too bad you didn’t get yours?” How awful would that be?

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Or what if you believed that appropriate boundaries didn't apply to you? So you might think it's okay to insult other people at will or to abuse them physically or sexually. Or you might think that every slight you ever experienced had to be avenged? Or you might imagine that you didn't have to be truthful.

Do we see the hell on earth unleashed without the authoritative teacher?

But, in fact, the authoritative teacher has come and cast out evil. And working through the church and even beyond the church the authoritative teacher still casts out evil and replaces it with goodness.

So we know our true value rests not upon our looks, wealth, intelligence, power, or success. It rests upon our being priceless children of God. And we can rest in that.

We know our purpose in life is to be agents of the reign of God that is on the horizon and coming. So we work for justice and mercy in every area of life, including public policy.

We know that we find joy not in pursuing self-interest, but in serving God as we serve the least of these.

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We know human relationships are meant to be built on mutuality not coercion, that forgiveness is given to us and expected from us, and that the truth shall set us free.

We know these things and as we come to this place and gather with these people, and as we read this peculiar and wonderful old book, and as we pray and listen and sing, we hear that voice beyond all voices, the Teacher beyond all teachers. The class he teaches is love. He teaches with authority, and even now calls forth students to learn and students to share what they have learned with a world that so desperately needs it. “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.” Amen. ©Jeff Paschal