

Up-Dates on a Ancient Text

[Text - Mark 1:21-28]

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In this morning's New Testament reading, we hear Mark's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It's a short text, yet it contains a tremendous amount of information about who Jesus is, and what his ministry entails. As we look at this text, I'd like us to think about what it says concerning *us* and *our* ministry. Because if you and I - as the Church - are to be the Living Body of Christ today, then we need to examine how Jesus - as the Christ - performs his ministry. If we are to move that ministry forward in these modern times, then we need to look back at how it began. Now I'll admit, that our reading contains some imagery that doesn't seem particularly modern; in fact, it seems pretty primitive! However, this 1st Century text has some really solid insights that can help you and me take-on the Spiritual challenges of this 21st Century.

"Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and...Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. The people were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority...." One of the critical challenges facing the modern Church, has to do with the problem of *authority*. Gone are the days when the proclamation of a pope was heeded by a worldwide Church. [The Protestant Reformation eliminate that.] Today, many Roman Catholics don't even take the teachings that come from the Vatican as being authoritative or binding. And many Protestants also struggle with this issue of *authority*. In an age when headlines highlight corruption within the Church, and abuses by Church leaders, it's difficult for the Church to claim any genuine, definitive authority.

Now, some churches try to reassert their authority by claiming that they hold the "true" interpretation of the *Bible*, and that their literal understanding of Biblical texts allows their leaders to "speak for God"! Unfortunately, these leaders only select those texts that fit their own restrictive messages - messages that often contradict the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. Jesus was familiar with this kind of inflexible and oppressive religious leadership himself; and he immediately challenges it. In that synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus teaches with a refreshing and uplifting authority - one that encourages people and holds their attention. And though Mark doesn't record what Jesus says, we can surmise from what happens next, and from

Jesus' subsequent teachings, that he talks about the liberating and Life-changing power of Divine Love and Grace.

Jesus' message generates excitement, joy, and amazement from the people gathered there. And, apparently, it even elicits a response from an "unclean spirit" that is also present: "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!" This sinister spirit of negativity tries to subvert Jesus' ministry; but Jesus will not be stopped. He rebukes that toxic presence, saying "Be silent and come out of him!" - making it clear that the time of oppressing God's children is done! In Jesus Christ, a Healing, Holy Spirit has arrived in full force, driving that negative spirit out of that man, and out of that synagogue.

Mark then writes, "They were all *amazed....And immediately*, Jesus' reputation began to spread throughout the region!" Well, no kidding! Just imagine the next day's conversations around the office water-cooler [or the oasis watering hole]:

"I tell you, Simon, you should have been in synagogue this weekend."

"Why, did we have a potluck dinner? You know how much I like those dinners!"

"Well yes, we did. But we also had an amazing, powerful teaching about the Life-changing, liberating love of God; **and** the exorcism of a demonic spirit!"

"Oh... I guess that means no deviled eggs at our next potluck."

Of *course* the people were amazed! This was not your typical, worship experience! Nor should it be. Unfortunately, there are those who expect some kind of spectacular spiritual struggle, or emotional exorcism every time they gather for worship. There *are* religious communities that thrive on the negative, looking for the devil behind every bush, and at the root of every problem. And, not surprisingly, they're always *finding* the devil; but they are *missing* the point. Jesus doesn't go into that synagogue looking for the devil. He goes there to find and connect with the Family of God; and to teach and show them the gracious, Life-changing Love of God. Yet Jesus isn't entirely surprised to find an oppressive spirit in a place of worship.

The unclean spirit says, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" - which is a way of saying, "Mind your own business, Jesus! Go back to Nazareth where you belong, and leave us alone!" But Jesus proclaims,

"This is precisely where I belong! This *is* my business! *People* are my business! And I have come to confront and cast-out any destructive spirits of fear, hatred and oppression that hold God's people captive! So shut-up, get-out, and stop harassing God's children!" Right from the start, Jesus shows that he is a man on a mission! He has come to teach, and to demonstrate, that God is Love; and that God desires *all* people to breathe in that liberating, Life-changing Spirit of Divine Compassion and Wholeness. And Jesus is so deeply committed to this mission, that he will challenge and drive-away any power or obstacle that keeps people from receiving that Good News; especially those obstacles that are found within religious institutions.

When Jesus teaches in that synagogue, he not only breaks the old pattern of dull and ineffective teaching, he also breaks the strict religious rules that are being taught. The rules say that you don't do *any* work on the Sabbath, even if that "work" involves helping or healing or setting-free someone in need. But Jesus isn't deterred by that kind of rigid legalism. He comes, not only to set individuals free, but also to break the hold of those religious and social power-structures that oppress those vulnerable people. Jesus has a tremendous passion to work for the dignity and restoration of *all* people; and he refuses to let anything stop him - not even the long-held teachings of his own faith tradition.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus gets into a lot of hot water for performing acts of healing on the Sabbath; for eating and drinking with "sinners and outcasts", prostitutes and tax collector; and for challenging a religious system that excludes certain people as being unfit for the Realm of God. Ironically, there are still people within Christ's Church who try to exclude others. It's as if they are saying, "Mind your own business, Jesus of Nazareth! Go back to Nazareth - go back to the 1st Century and leave us alone, so we can possess and be possessed by our prejudices, our judgments, and our fear-driven spirits."

The Good News, is that the Divine Spirit of Love and Grace which Jesus Christ embodies, isn't relegated to the 1st Century! A Cross and Nails couldn't restrain him; a sealed tomb could not contain him. Right here, right now, that same Holy, Life-affirming Spirit is here to drive-away our prejudices and fears, and fill us with Divine power and grace. That ancient story of Christ's compassion, is as fresh and relevant as it's always been! And our BUCC Mission: "To Love, Serve, and Accept All People with God's

Life-Changing Power” is precisely what our contemporary world needs. The primary reason I returned to the practice of Pastoral Ministry, is that I found within the United Church of Christ a wonderful, welcoming and caring community of faith. And I consider myself extremely fortunate to be a partner with all of you, in sharing that Good news with others. Jesus Christ shows us how to do it. Now, it’s up to us to keep-up the good work!