

**“It Takes One to Know One”**

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20    1 Corinthians 8:1-13    Mark 1:21-28**

I saw a little bit in a business magazine that said, “The trouble with being a leader today is that you can't be sure whether people are following you or chasing you.” I think that it has probably always been that way, and it is also true that leaders tend to recognize other leaders. People in authority tend to recognize other people in authority. “It takes one to know one.”

I think that is true of the encounter in today's gospel. Two times Jesus teaching is described as “having authority.” And while it is said that all the people there were both amazed and astounded at his teaching, it was only the man with the unclean spirit who really recognized the identity of Jesus' authority.

Casting out demons and unclean spirits is not something we tend to think much of in these modern times. But I believe that it is still true that it takes one to know one. We may find it easier to remember situations when we say of another, “I have no idea what got into him.” A number of years ago when I lived in Miami I was at an NBA game watching the home team Miami Heat play I forget who.

Pat Riley had recently been made the head coach and his star center was a remarkable athlete named Alonzo Mourning who was both tall and nimble and very strong. Alonzo Mourning had the reputation around town of being a model citizen who was very generous in donating time to a number of charitable causes. But this one night was not his night.

On one play in the third quarter he was driving to the basket. He was tightly guarded by the defending player, but scored a layup nevertheless. He fell to the floor but no foul was called. He immediately jumped to his feet to plead his case with the umpire all to no effect. Being ignored by the umpire infuriated Alonzo Mourning just that much more and he chased the umpire down the floor yelling at him. A technical foul was called, but Alonzo Mourning didn't even begin to calm down; he continued to plead his case with the umpire obviously upset gesturing wildly with his arms. Pat Riley was running out on the court to try to calm down his star player. It was obvious that his emotions were getting the best of him, but Riley was too late. A second technical was called and Mourning was ejected from the game, but still he didn't calm down and continued to flail around. He started to dejectedly walk over to the bench but Riley would not allow it. Coach Riley just stood on the floor pointing toward the exit for Mourning. Riley didn't say anything; he just stood there pointing toward the exit.

In hind sight that seemed like a kind of exorcism, but I don't want to make too much of it because Alonzo Mourning was back in the line up the next night, and he eventually learned to keep his emotions in check. But this gospel lesson is more significant than that.

I started to begin this sermon by asking if there was anyone here with an unclean spirit. I thought better of it because I don't want to trivialize or make light of a spiritual reality, that there are times when we, I say we, myself included struggle with very difficult dynamics, and I don't want to gloss over that this may be very fresh for some here.

Let's take a careful look at how Mark tells this story. Jesus is making a big splash with the people in the synagogue. They were "astounded" at his teaching. Last week we were given a synopsis of Jesus teaching; his gospel was one of immediacy, "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news." That was so much different than the scribes they were used to.

But beyond the people being astounded we are only told of Jesus engaging with one man, the man with the unclean spirit, he might have been considered an outsider because Mark tells us that he was in their synagogue. In any case, he knows that the gospel is not just astounding, the gospel demands a response. And the man with the unclean spirit actually asks a very good question, "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?" The unclean spirit knows what is at stake here, two authorities cannot occupy the same place. In a different place Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters, either he will hate one and love the other or love one and hate the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon." This encounter was about more than just hearing a good sermon.

And Jesus answers these questions in a very concise manner. He says, "Be silent and come out of him." The image I have here is of Pat Riley the coach silently standing on the floor, not saying a word, just pointing toward the locker room. Just standing there, Silence, true silence, non anxious, interior silence is the most powerful language of love that God can use. I say it is a language of love because God's spirit of love has no end, it never runs out, it never runs dry, and there is no end to its patience.

Everything else will eventually come to an end. We may not think in terms of evil spirits these days. We may talk about addictions; we may talk about forms of violence and abuse; we may diagnose mental health diseases, emotional problems, spiritual vices like greed or lust or prideful ambition or petty resentments. Some are big, others seem small. They will all grow to the extent we feed them but none of them are eternal. Only God's love is eternal.

God's love is like a big river that keeps on flowing, silently flowing, always immediately flowing, and every unclean spirit known to humankind is like a boat flowing down that river. No matter how big the boat it will eventually pass, if we just remain silent, don't climb on board, focus on the river, not the boat, and it will pass, it will go out, it will be evacuated out of your soul.

Notice something here in the story that is actually significantly different than Alonzo Mourning being ejected from that game. It is the unclean spirit that Jesus commands to come out of him, not the man himself. The man wasn't ejected from the synagogue. Mark doesn't tell us, but I have my opinion. My opinion is that this man became the fifth disciple. I think he followed Jesus.

It is very tempting to be distracted by the amazement of the crowd. The buzz was on; Jesus fame was spreading all over, but amazement is only for a while and fame can go as quickly as it comes. Jesus was never concerned about being famous. He was never overly impressed by people being either astounded or amazed.

He did have time to engage with a man with an unclean spirit and to stick close with him through convulsions and acting out. I heard it put this way, "Jesus didn't come to remove suffering or to explain it away. He came to fill it with his presence."

That is as true today as it ever was, right here in Palmetto, right here in this church. I know there are people here today who have had evil spirits cast out of them by the power of God's love. I am one of them. I say that not to amaze you, because it is also very clear that God is not done with me yet. I say that to invite you to respond to Jesus invitation to follow him, to also humbly seek to be his disciple, to learn from his word, to sit under his word, to serve him by serving the poor in our midst, to celebrate his resurrection by seeing ourselves in relationship with all of God's children, by being an active part of his community of faith, by accepting his invitation to join together in this feast we celebrate today.

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