

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 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." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.
Mark 1:21-29

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?

The man with the unclean spirit asked Jesus this question, but perhaps it would be a good question for us to ask of Jesus. What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? What do you want from us? What do you come to disrupt in our lives, in our church, and in the world?

Today's Gospel continues from last week when Jesus called his first disciples, but I'm thinking that this might be just about the time the disciples start to ask some questions about this person they have left everything to follow. Who is this guy, really? When are we going to stop for lunch and where exactly are we going to sleep tonight? Who thought that leaving everything to follow this guy was a good idea? But it's the Sabbath, so they follow Jesus to the synagogue, which is always a good place to find some answers, and Jesus begins to teach.

We aren't told what Jesus taught that day, but we do know that everyone was astounded by it. I wonder if they were astounded in a good way, or an outraged way? Clearly it was not what they were used to hearing from the scribes. It was a new teaching – with authority. Just then, a man with an unclean spirit burst into the service, intent on disrupting the teaching of Jesus.

It's easy for us to discount the idea of unclean spirits or demons, relegating them to bible stories. Mental health science has come a long way in diagnosing the biological and psychological illnesses once labeled as demonic. We don't know *what* was wrong with the man in the synagogue that day, but Jesus knew.

Are there still unclean spirits among us? Do we have demons in our lives today? If we define demons as forces of evil, as actions either individual or corporate, that separate us from God, if we think of it this way, maybe we can admit that we do actually know something about demons.

Perhaps we have been possessed by anger at a colleague or family member, causing us to say and do things we regret. Maybe there have been times when we were possessed by jealousy, the need to be right, or the need to always have the last word, which will almost always end a good relationship. Sometimes there are inner voices, false voices, that demand perfection, that keep us in constant comparison and competition with others, and they are never satisfied.

Maybe the demons even come to church from time to time. Take note that the man with the unclean spirit was *in* the synagogue *on* the Sabbath! It's probably a safe bet that every Sunday, even in a pandemic, maybe especially in a pandemic, people attending online churches, people sitting on sofas everywhere, are fighting demons. We may be fighting against addictions or depression; we may be struggling with the more subtle demons of pride, greed, prejudice, or the need to control. Whatever our demons, most of them can be boiled down to fear. Maybe it's fear of failure, fear of not having enough, or fear of not being accepted and loved. So often in churches it is fear of losing a treasured past even as the future remains unknown. Fear can often fuel our behavior and manifest itself in actions that separate us from God, and rob us of all that God hopes and intends for us.

When the demons appear, and they will, what are we to do? Notice that in the gospel, the man went straight to the synagogue with his demon! Something was drawing this man with an unclean spirit to Jesus. He recognized something in Jesus, an authority like no other, that would cleanse him with the truth. Also notice that Jesus didn't ignore or shame the man with the unclean spirit. Instead, Jesus engaged him and spoke truth to him with his rebuke. And then Jesus healed him, freeing him from all that separated him from God.

We too can receive this healing freedom from Jesus. We are healed when we can face our demons together and in the presence of Christ, supporting one another unselfishly for the good of the Body of Christ, for the well-being of the community. We can give up our demons to the love and authority of Jesus, to the Holy One of God. This authority of Jesus can give us great freedom from the demons that seek to control us in so many areas of our lives.

What does God hope and intend for us? And what demons might be interfering in that? I want to encourage you to think about your fears for a moment, because it's in and around our fear that the demons often begin to gather. What are the fears and concerns in your life? What demons are dancing around the edges of your mind right now? You too can cry out to Jesus about any fears or demons holding you captive. What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth?

Whenever the tension mounts in a relationship or a situation the demons arrive... and that is precisely when we are in need of some astounding teaching from Jesus. Whenever we think we know best without needing to really listen to another perspective, or to the needs and vulnerabilities of another, the demons show up. That is when we need a new teaching with authority, not from any worldly source, but from the Holy One.

Jesus does indeed come to bring new life. That usually means there will be some disruption of our old, messy lives and sometimes that can be scary. Demons always fear any disruption in the status quo. This is why the voices in the man with the unclean spirit asked, "Have you come to destroy us?" Yes, that is exactly what Jesus has come for. He has come to destroy the false voices and the fears and give us clean spirits. He stands before us as the mirror image of who we can become; he is concerned about every aspect of our lives. Jesus came to teach us, calm our fears, and command the demons that grip us to be silent and come out. Jesus still comes to us - in our scripture, in our community (even a virtual one), in the bread at the communion table, and in our hearts.

What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God?
Everything. Absolutely everything. Amen.