

Restore us, O GOD; let Your face shine, that we may be healed!
Mark 1.21-28

The sermon Luis brought to us last Sunday has been working in me this week. And it's provided a context for this story from the Gospel of Mark. Luis talked about social systems, about the Body of Christ being an alternative system to the system of dominant culture. He compared social systems to forests. As individuals, we are the trees, part of the forest, but we're not the forest itself. And the Body of Christ, the system known as the Kingdom of God, is called to a new way of being a system together. In order to live as the Body of Christ, we are being healed from social diseases, such as racism and classism. Because in the Kingdom of God, Luis reminded us, there is no ladder of importance; there is no hierarchy of being.

The Gospel of Mark confirms this. Its stories tell us that in the Kingdom of God, instead of a hierarchy there is the immediacy of bodies—and in God's Kingdom, *all* bodies are loved; *all* bodies receive justice; all bodies are worthy of grace and mercy.

This preference for the human being—especially for those people that the diseased social system has violated and imprisoned and forgotten—the preference for these human beings is threatening to the establishment, whether religious or social or political. The security and continuity of the establishment and its institutions depends on some people living on the backs of the people it considers disposable.

So this is one of the contexts for hearing and seeing this exorcism story.

There's another context that we need. And that's something about the Gospel of Mark itself. If this Gospel were a movie, it would be Action/Adventure. It's full of action with big, sweeping events happening in rapid sequences. An obvious example is that the word *immediately* shows up in every chapter, and many chapters multiple times. (Chapter 1 alone, 9 times!) And in the movie genres, Matthew and Luke would be dramas with unfolding and layered narratives. And John...i'm thinking it would fit into the Indie category, an artistic and imaginative work.

The point is, Mark's Gospel requires a particular kind of listening and seeing. This exorcism story is near the end of the first chapter. And here are all the things that have already happened in chapter 1: John the Baptist has prepared the way by calling people to repentance and baptism; he's baptized Jesus; and when he did, the heavens were torn open (they didn't just open, they were torn open! Action/adventure!); Jesus has been in the wilderness being tempted; John has been arrested; Jesus has declared the arrival of the Kingdom of God; and he's called four disciples.

All of that and we're only at v 20!

And from this story of Jesus' first exorcism, he and the disciples *immediately* go to Simon's house where he heals Simon's mother-in-law. And the *whole village* comes to the house and he heals many more people. And then he goes off by himself, where there are no people, no bodies, where he is alone to pray and be in communion with God—God who split open the heavens to claim Jesus as *beloved son*. This pattern repeats itself throughout Mark, this movement from place to place, from trees to forest, from crowds and healing, to solitude.

We need this broader scope of the Gospel of Mark as a context for the exorcism story in order to see and hear it within the bigger pattern. It's a remarkable story if we look at it on its own; but the story is a piece of the larger story that Mark is telling. The repeating movements and patterns of these fast-moving actions tell the larger story of Jesus, and healing, and the Kingdom of God.

This particular story takes place on the Sabbath, in the synagogue. The Sabbath is holy space and the synagogue, a holy place. The Sabbath and the synagogue both have deep roots in the Jewish faith, in Jesus' faith. And while the Sabbath and synagogue may be holy space and place, we can be sure that the social systems of the day had established all kinds of walls around them to keep them

securely bound in a tradition and in a narrative about who they were and who their God was. And who “other” people were.

We know the rules of Sabbath and synagogue. Our Mennonite church and worship institutions are equally well bound by our traditions and by our story about who we are and who our God is. And who *others* are.

And into the synagogue on this particular Sabbath walks Jesus. And he begins to teach. Mark never tells us what Jesus taught, but 3x he repeats that Jesus taught them: “Jesus entered the synagogue and *taught*. They were astounded at his *teaching*, for he *taught* them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

And there it is. The content of Jesus teaching isn’t important. The gathering wasn’t astounded by Jesus’ intellect, but by his authority. Jesus taught with authority, with power, with assurance and freedom. Not like the scribes. Not like anyone they’d seen before.

It’s likely that Jesus was reading Scripture. So we might assume that whatever it was he read, he read it in such a way that the worshipers heard something new, something they’d never heard before from their well-known holy scrolls. Whatever it was—his reading, his interpretation, his posture—his teaching was astounding. Not like the scribes.

Jesus’ teaching announced the Kingdom of God. His teaching woke up the gathering. And it disturbed the unclean spirit. It cried out, “What are you doing to us? Are you here to destroy us?”

It’s important that we’re aware that this unclean spirit was in a holy space and place. It had clearly been coming to the synagogue for quite some time. And week after week, it had been safe there. All the walls that had been built around the Sabbath and synagogue had served to keep out a lot of unclean bodies, but apparently there was no screening for unclean spirits. This particular unclean spirit was disturbed and threatened on this particular Sabbath day, by this particular teacher. Not like the teaching of the scribes.

This contrast—between the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of the scribes—is part of the pattern that Mark will repeat and return to throughout the Gospel. There is Jesus announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God. And there are the scribes. There is Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit; Jesus for whom the heavens were torn open so that the Holy Spirit of God could descend on him. And there are the unclean spirits. Contrasting patterns.

The unclean spirit cries out what the scribes, who are equally afraid, cannot, “What are you doing? Are you trying to destroy us?” It won’t be long in Mark’s Gospel before we hear the scribes plotting to destroy Jesus.

Jesus rebukes the spirit, “Be silent, and come out of him! And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.”

In the Kingdom of God that Mark is describing, unclean spirits come out and diseases are healed. When the Kingdom of God arrives, the unclean spirits that keep social systems diseased are called out. When Jesus arrives, those in his presence know that something new—that some perceive as healing, that some perceive as threatening—they know that something else is possible. They know that the wounds they’ve been carrying, individually and collectively, can be healed.

Our impulse is to think that healing is a good thing, something easy. Who wouldn’t want to be healed? Even systems, why would systems choose to keep functioning in diseased and broken ways? Why not let Jesus call out our unclean spirits? Why not let the healing of the Kingdom of God wash over us?

This story of an unclean spirit being called out shows us in no uncertain terms how threatening healing can be. The presence of Jesus, beloved son of God, infused with the Holy Spirit of God, exposed the unclean spirit. It had been coming into this space, week after week, year after year, securely inhabiting a particular man. But when Jesus with the Kingdom of God arrived, the space and place were no longer hospitable for the unclean spirit. Jesus didn’t destroy the spirit. But he

called it out. The unclean spirit could simply not withstand the authority and power of the Holy Spirit-filled Jesus, of Jesus, heir to the throne in the Kingdom of God.

The exorcism wasn't effortless. It wasn't easy. One of the reasons we sometimes don't want to be healed, and that makes healing so threatening to individuals and to systems, is that we will be convulsed. We will be shaken. When unclean spirits leave our bodies—our collective and individual bodies—there is a certain trauma. When the space occupied by our wounds and by our stories about our wounds is vacated, it can be frightening. If it's an institution, it has to completely re-imagine and re-structure itself. Or as an individual, I have to learn a completely new story about myself and my place in the world. And about other people.

The calling out of the unclean spirit is at the center of this story. But when we see the patterns in Mark's storytelling, we see that on either side of this center is the authority and power of Jesus that leaves the gathering astounded. And then we see that the exorcism of the unclean spirit isn't the only calling out—Jesus was also calling out the scribes. But the scribes were threatened. They weren't interested in healing. They wouldn't be convulsed or let go of their demons.

It's great to celebrate the exorcism of this unclean spirit, but in the larger narrative, it isn't the end but the beginning. The stage is now set—the arrival of the Kingdom of God and the presence of Jesus threaten the diseased social system. Jesus knows this. And the scribes know it.

And this is where we turn to see another pattern in Mark's Gospel, the pattern of withdrawal. Jesus engages in public places and spaces. He engages with individuals and with systems. Crowds of people come to him for healing and he gives himself to them, one body at a time. And when he bumps into the collective, into the diseased social systems, he has no fear; he's unafraid to confront.

And after he engages, he withdraws. He goes to a place where there are no people so he can be alone. Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus does when he's alone, but we can imagine. His times of solitude are essential for his own healing. Alone with his Father/Mother God, Jesus is renewed. And after being held in the love and grace of the living God, Jesus is once again ready to be with others, inviting them into the Kingdom of God, knowing that some will welcome the healing. And others will be threatened.

In this exorcism story, Jesus is healer. And hero. But as Mark's story unfolds, it will be Jesus, not the unclean spirits, who will be threatened and destroyed. And when Jesus is arrested and brought to trial, the frenzied crowd is convulsing, not because they are being healed but because they are so agitated by the spirits of fear and hate, shouting, "Crucify him!" And when Jesus is on the cross, this time he is the one crying out in a loud voice.

But of course Jesus' death wasn't the end...the end of the story is resurrection. And by faith we claim that resurrection is the end of all stories!

Living in the Kingdom of God isn't an easy life. The healing of bodies and of social systems isn't an easy thing. It's hard. And it hurts. And real people are destroyed. And this is why we learn to see our stories within the larger story of Kingdom of God. If we focus only on our particular stories, we'll miss the pattern of the larger narrative—the narrative of resurrection, the narrative of Life and Aliveness.

May we live into the Kingdom of God, engaging each other, engaging all others.

May we have the courage to be astounded by the teaching of Jesus, opening ourselves to healing, letting Jesus call out our unclean spirits.

And may we seek solitude, letting ourselves be held by our Father/Mother God. And while we are alone, being held in perfect Love, may we see God tearing open the heavens to claim us as beloved daughters and sons.