

What Kind of Authority is This?
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
Jan 21, 2018– AM Sermon
Rev. Ruth Boven
Mark 1:21-28

One of the great things about the story we just read is that it happened in a place very familiar to us – church! It was the Sabbath and so the Jews around Capernaum did what they typically did on the Sabbath. They went to the synagogue. They went to church. And I suspect that many of those in worship that Sabbath day came as we come here today – looking for a little peace and quiet, looking for some rest and renewal after a busy week. Wow, were they wrong about that. Just as they settled in for the sermon, lights dimmed, peppermint ingested, Scripture read, as the preacher was a few paragraphs into the sermon, someone in the middle of the sanctuary, maybe about halfway down seated right in the middle of the pew, stands up and starts screaming. Yelling. Shreaking at Jesus in a demonic voice (whatever that might sound like). Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet,” says Jesus, “come out of him.” And then with some wild convulsing and even more shrieking the evil spirit departed.

You know, I can’t help wondering what happened next. Did the liturgist pop up and cheerfully remind everyone of the potluck happening that afternoon? It’s a little hard to imagine how the service would have continued after such a violent interruption. But here’s a more important question this passage raises; how do we relate to a story that feels so very far from our own experience? The truth is, we’re not very familiar with or comfortable with the idea of literal demon possession in our world today. And in this sermon I won’t be delving into the particulars of that. Why? Well, because there’s a message in this text that goes deeper than that. You see, foundationally this story addresses the two most powerful and opposing forces that are at work in our world at all times; the power of evil and the power of love.

Remember we’re only in the first chapter of Mark here. Jesus has been baptized, tempted in the wilderness, has called his disciples to follow him and now for his very first act of ministry, Jesus steps into a showdown with the power of evil. So, what does evil look like in this story?

Well, it looks like a child of God robbed of what God intends for him. It looks like an image bearer who’s been silenced, squelched, diminished, and shackled by a force stronger than he is. What we know is that evil’s forces are always out to curse instead of bless. To tear down rather than build up. To disparage rather than encourage. To sow hate rather than promote love. To split us apart rather than draw us together.

Now, as one commentator put it, “Seen this way, I have to admit that not only is possession not quite as foreign an event as I might have thought, but that I actually have firsthand experience with it. I have, that is, on occasion been possessed by anger at a colleague or family member that has led me to do things and say things I regret. I have been possessed by jealousy and envy that has led me to use my resources in ways I regret. And that’s just the beginning.” He points out that for some the experience of possession involves addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling, pornography, or perhaps a more socially acceptable addiction like workaholicism, affluenza, or greed. Haven’t every one of us, he asks, had the experience of being possessed by something that is so clearly not the Spirit of God in us – who is full of grace and truth and mercy and goodness and holiness and love? But what Mark would have us know, here

at the beginning of his account of Jesus' ministry on earth, is that we are not on our own in facing down the effects of evil in us.

And that's not all. We are also not on our own in facing down the pain and suffering that evil causes in the world around us. In Jesus, says Mark, an opposing and stronger power has shown up. In Jesus the power of God's unbreakable love is here with us. And it is always for us, and never against us. William Sloan Coffin Jr was a man of great faith and is known as one of the great preachers in 20th century America. None of that gave him or his family immunity from suffering and pain. Many years ago Coffin's son Alex was tragically killed in a car accident when his car plummeted into Boston Harbor. Soon after, Coffin preached about the death of his son. One of the points he made in that sermon was about how painful and maddening it was to hear someone tell him that Alex's death was God's will. Coffin's contention was that death was never what God intended for us from the beginning. That's evil's intention. Death and separation are what evil dreamed up. God created us for life and for love and for relationship. In what's perhaps the most famous line of that sermon Coffin says this, "My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first to break." In Jesus, an opposing and stronger power has shown up. In Jesus the power of God's unbreakable love is here with us – and it is always for us, and never against us.

Even before Jesus' cast the demon out in our story, the people had already noticed something different about him. They described it as having authority; but not as the scribes had it, the ones who knew all the laws like the back of their hands. Maybe the people sitting in church that day saw for the first time that coming to church, wasn't first of all about downloading knowledge of the law into their heads from the scribes. You see, the Scribes' authority was only law-oriented and handed down to them through historical privilege. But Jesus' authority was people-oriented and it went way back, back to before the beginning of time. Back to when the love shared by the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, overflowed its boundaries and created and breathed life into this world. In Jesus, the power of God's unbreakable love has shown up on our soil. Love that compelled him to the cross, carrying all our sin and guilt and suffering and pain. Love that propelled him out of death's tomb, to break evil's strong grip on this world. I believe that's what actually brought you to church this morning; the desire to encounter that kind of authority, that kind of power, that kind of love. And this is certainly one of the best places to do that.

Because here, especially this morning in baptism, we remember and celebrate that God, through Jesus, has an unbreakable grip on us, and on our children. Here we confess our sins and with Jesus' loving authority, they're forgiven. Here we remember and believe at the Lord's table that Jesus' kind of authority bends low and washes feet and goes the way of sacrifice – for love of you and me.

But this isn't the only place to encounter Jesus' authority, of course. Years ago I visited a woman in the neighborhood of the church I was serving. She had many struggles with her health, including a fierce and ongoing battle with depression. Her house was nearly completely dark when I came in. There was one small lamp turned on near the side of the couch where she had obviously been spending a lot of time. In the light of that lamp, I could see two cards she was displaying. When I asked her about them she proudly showed them to me. They were both from church people. And right now they were her lifeline. Both of them declared, that the power of God's unbreakable love was stronger than anything else that had a hold on her. Which makes me want to say to you, please never underestimate the power of a simple card, or phone call, or

hand-squeeze or promise of prayer. Because the One with all authority in heaven and on earth has the power to use what you offer - to loosen evil's strong grip and to strengthen a heart. You likely know that over the last few weeks, LaGrave has experienced a tremendous amount of loss. Many of us have found ourselves in funeral homes or memorial services or standing at the graveside of someone we love. But, you can see signs of a power that's stronger than evil there too, you know.

I remember so clearly one of my own graveside experiences. My dad's older brother, Al, had died. He was buried in the Vogel Center cemetery. Al was deeply cherished by his wife and family and by his siblings. What I won't forget about leaving that brief graveside service was the sound that came out of my dad as he turned to walk away. It was just one loud short cry, that held within it the sting and pain of death's separation, but even more than that, it held the glorious power of love. Love that first came from God, its source. Love that is stronger than death.

Friends, it's in that power we live and move and serve. And in that power this week we can bravely act against the evil that is keeping you or someone else from flourishing. It might look like a card with a stamp on it. It might sound like a prayer over the phone or a justice call to your senator. It might smell like a casserole. It might feel like the squeeze of a hand or a sympathetic pat on the back or the strength to simply face another day. It might finally bring you through the doors of an AA meeting or to the side of someone who needs their feet washed or tire changed or math tutored. But in it all is the very power of God, the power of love. Aren't you glad you and Jesus came to church today? Thanks be to God. Amen

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