

Epiphany 4 B 2012 "Authority"

Last week I was discouraged by the South Carolina primary.

It seemed to me that victory depended on who shouted the loudest and the longest.

The citizens were swallowed up by a media inundation.

I read articles analyzing which superpac would spend the most money, the foregone conclusion being the candidate who spent the most wins.

One candidate withdrew from the race, saying in effect: "In the current climate, we cannot have a thoughtful discussion of the issues facing our country."

It seems to me that we so often confuse authority with money.

We confuse authority with political influence.

We confuse authority with style.

Today Mark tells the story of Jesus casting out an unclean spirit.

It is the first miracle story in the Gospel of Mark.

Sit up and take notice, because "firsts" in any narrative usually aren't by accident.

This miracle story is the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee.

So what is Mark trying to tell us about Jesus and his significance for our lives through this story?

It has everything to do with authority,

Authority that has nothing to do with style or human influence,

And has everything to do with being from God.

Jesus' teaching is summarized seven verses prior to our Gospel story with these words: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The kingdom of God here!

God is present, here, now.

God is at work.

God's reign is happening right among us!

That is the teaching that struck the people of Capernaum as authority.

Their religious leaders weren't announcing the kingdom.

Jesus was.

They weren't making it happen.

And all the early miracles in Mark describe what this kingdom of God looks like.

Earlier in the chapter, in a story you heard three weeks ago, Jesus was baptized and blessed with the Holy Spirit as he heard the promise proclaimed to him, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased!"

Now Mark contrasts that experience with that of the man possessed by an "unclean" spirit, a spirit that is most assuredly NOT telling him that he is beloved of God or God-pleasing in anyway.

We would be far better served to abandon our Hollywood-fed images of demons causing us to vomit and spin our heads (Exorcist-style).

Instead, see demons as those forces that are diametrically opposed to God' will. Rather than bless, they curse.

Rather than build up, they tear down.

Rather than encourage, they disparage.

Rather than promote love, they sow hate.

Rather than draw us together, they seek to split us apart.

Jesus, Mark tells us, has authority over these demonic forces.

We could boil down the first chapter of Mark in this way: Jesus was baptized, tempted in the wilderness, and now comes to proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom of God on earth.

He does this by *opposing the forces of evil which would rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for them.*

Seen this way, possession is not quite as foreign an event as I might have thought. I actually have first-hand experience with it.

On occasion, I am possessed by anger at a colleague or a family member that has led me to say and do things I regret.

I have been possessed by jealousy and envy that had led me to use my resources in ways I regret. And that's just the beginning.

And can you, honestly, tell me that you haven't had these experiences also, when you feel possessed by something that is so clearly NOT the Spirit of God blessing you to be a blessing to others?

Some people are possessed by addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling, or pornography.

Some people are possessed by a hidden but pervasive prejudice that keeps them captive.

Some people are blinded by comfort or habit.

Some people are so wrapped up in survival that they forget the task of living.

Some are possessed by fear.

Others are possessed by more society-approved unclean spirits like workaholism, affluenza, or greed.

Others are filled with blaming and fault-finding and public ridiculing.

Self-centeredness grabs on to us and will not let us go.

What are some of the God-contrary spirits that possess you?

When Jesus healed that man in the synagogue at Capernaum so many years ago, he announced to the world by his actions that the kingdom of God is here:

The kingdom that heals and restores and makes whole;

The kingdom that has way more power than any of the unclean spirits in our lives;

The kingdom filled with God's hope and intentions;

The kingdom of God.

Here's the thing: Jesus is still in the business of freeing us from those powers which seek to rob God's children of all God hopes and intends for us.

Jesus is still at work cleansing us from such spirits.

Is it as dramatic as our Gospel story? Actually, sometimes it is.

Ask around and you'll soon find stories of people who have had dramatic and sudden encounters with grace and mercy.

But sometimes it's not.

Sometimes the road to healing and restoration takes both time and company.

Sometimes it's not about a single event but the steady presence of a grief support group, or an AA group at the church, or a prayer chain, or a parenting group, or notices about anger-management classes, or whatever.

God is at work in all these ways and so many more to free us from the unclean spirits that still possess us.

As those battles are fought and won in your spirit,

God calls you to be the means through which God heals and restores life in other people.

You are not only the receiver of God's victory in Christ, you are God's messenger of that spirit and life for other people.

Through your serving, others come to see the light God intends for all of us.

Through your words, people hear hope in the promises of God.

Through your actions, people come and see for themselves when the kingdom of God has come near.

Jesus taught with authority in the synagogue in Capernaum because he is God's kingdom happening here.

His authority has nothing to do with style or political influence or money.

His authority is all about the kingdom of God.

His authority is about healing people and making them whole.

His authority is about giving people life in this world and the next.

It is in his authority that we gather, it is in his name that we praise.