

Sermon for Jan. 31, 2021

Gospel: Mark 1:21–28

They went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath [Jesus] entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. And immediately 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 out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

I was watching a television show the other day... not a very good one, because there is so little on television that is of any worth these days... a so-called 'reality' show about what it's like to work in service aboard one of these super luxury yachts.

It's not a show I would recommend. The program I was watching had ended and, since I wasn't really *watching* television, the next one sort of played through while I was working on other projects. But it slowly drew my attention because I was picking up on a message that I don't think that they intended to send -- that all these life choices these young people were making only ended up causing drama and hurt feelings and the need to apologize over and over. It became clear to me that if they had simply focused on their jobs and followed the rules, they would be much happier people who had far fewer problems and much cleaner consciences.

I guess you could say it's a show that is actually pretty good at teaching young people how NOT to behave. And not just young people. It's been teaching me to develop a better work ethic in the same way that the old *Highlights* magazine did, when it featured the cartoon "Goofus and Gallant." Of course there are a lot more "Goofuses" on this show because I guess it's entertaining to watch people make mistakes. I'm certain that's the intended message of the show... watch these attractive young inexperienced kids interact with and serve these rich and privileged and often arrogant charter guests. FUN! And for that reason, I never intended to watch it. It was only after I noticed what I thought HAD to be unintended lessons of morality, that the show piqued my curiosity. And I'm not recommending it, but I will draw an example from it, in order to illustrate a point in our lesson today.

Jesus is at the synagogue in Capernaum; teaching as one who had authority. The hearers of his message are astonished. (A fun translation would be, that they were "knocked out," "knocked for a loop" or even "floored" by his teaching.) I think Mark's purpose in using this phrase is to highlight just how radical the reception of this was. Jesus was turning heads, and hearts and minds. This message was with "authority," meaning it had power to move people. In contrast to

the Scribes, the professional preachers of the day. Jesus' words had the power to move people in heart and mind.

I don't think that the message of the scribes was wrong, exactly... it just lacked the connection to the lives of the people. Maybe they were "so heavenly minded" that it was no earthly good. The rubber was never actually hitting the road. It's a good reminder to me, to be sure that I'm not failing to preach the true Gospel. And if we look at the Old Testament lesson (Deuteronomy 18:15–20) for a second... that is also what it is talking about... that message focuses on God raising up prophets from among the congregations who will speak NOT their OWN words, but GOD'S WORD that He will put into their mouths. And then that warning against presuming to speak a word that God does not command, lest he die, which is a strong reminder to me as a preacher of God's words, to be faithful to GOD'S WORDS... And not end up preaching the seven habits of effective leadership or the purpose filled life, and somehow forget that everything begins and ends with Jesus.

Now, while Jesus is preaching, and the people are astonished at what they are hearing, one of the devil's minions has to speak up and attempt to spoil what's happening with an ill timed proclamation. "I know who you are. You are the Holy One of God." "The Deliverer" "The Savior" "You have come to destroy us!" That's trouble... we are told it is a demon or a devil speaking. Many people in the synagogue will notice that, others will not, and they may think that Jesus has come to destroy them... in either case it's awkward. And that's the point.

Now in the television show that I was watching, something similar occurred that I could use as an illustration for our text. The guests aboard the yacht were celebrating a Middle Eastern theme night and enjoying Middle Eastern style food. As a surprise for her guests, the chief steward had hired a belly dancer to come and perform at the end of the dinner service. This was to be a surprise for the guests. To give them 5-star service, the chief steward intended to give them even MORE than they requested. You asked for a Middle Eastern themed night, and to her than meant more than a few costumes, decorations, and a meal. The stewardesses brought forth the meal and the chief steward explained what they were serving. The chef had prepared lamb with African spices. "What are African Spices?" one of the guests wanted to know. The stewardess wasn't sure but asked if they would like the chef to come up and explain. This is a pretty common gesture and it allows the chef to be complimented directly by the guests. In the kitchen, she asked the chef if he would please explain what African spices he used to the guests. And so he came up from the kitchen and began to make small talk with the guests. He introduced himself and said "I understand we are going to do some dancing tonight?" The guests looked at him like he had carrots growing out of his ears. And the chief steward looked at him with her eyes open in horror. When he looked at her, she mouthed "NO," shaking her head "no" ever so slightly so as not to draw too much attention.

The chef was perplexed. "Isn't there going to be a belly-" She cut him off: "Chef! I was wondering if you would explain what African spices are in the lamb?" Her voice was friendly and calm but in her eyes there were daggers. The chef still didn't understand but switched topics as it was clear to him... and now clear to the guests... that he had said too much or too little. And

the guests acted clueless, but from that point on they knew something was up. And the chief steward also knew that her surprise was ruined. Maybe not completely... but the chef has sure put his foot in it. And harsh words were spoken once she reached the kitchen. Something like that is going on here in our gospel reading... The demon-possessed man speaks up when he shouldn't in order to throw a monkey-wrench into the works and spoil the surprise. Unlike the chef in the story, the demon knows exactly what he is doing and how it will effect Jesus' reputation.

Jesus puts an end to it quickly and even casts the spirit out of the man... but even if it didn't completely "ruin his dinner service," it had an effect. And while some would point to the effect positively in that it increased his fame, his notoriety, that also played a limiting factor. We are told, for example, that Jesus' fame had become such that he was unable to enter into the larger towns and communities because of the crowds and had to stay out in the boondocks, where there was a lack of comfortable things. And in some ways that just made his life more difficult. In a similar way, I think of the conversation that took place in the kitchen, between the chief and the steward... "If you had just done what I asked you to do, which was to explain the dish, and not tried to make chit-chat with the guest, you would not have spoiled the surprise I had for them." "I didn't know that I was spoiling anything, no one told me that the dancer was a surprise. And if you had a better understanding of your job, you could have told the guest what African spices were, and I could have stayed in the kitchen, and THIS wouldn't have happened. You invited me up on deck and you didn't warn me not to talk about the dancer. Don't blame me." "You are the chief, your job includes meeting the guests and talking about your food --not talking about my department."

As in most of life, it's poor communication that often results in misunderstanding and hard feelings. It's also important to notice that probably just as many misunderstandings and hard feelings result from not minding our own business, talking about things that don't concern us, or gossiping. That sometimes we get in the way of the Gospel... by the things we say or do. Sometimes it's out of ignorance or good intentions, but the result is as bad as if it were intentional.

People say and do very foolish and even hurtful things to one another, often intentionally, often unintentionally. And because, as in the case of this show, they have to continue to work together and live together, eventually someone will eventually apologize for what they did or said.

Some of the characters on this show do an awful lot of apologizing. At first my reaction to this was "hey, that was actually a good apology. SEE! Forgiveness changes everything. A good apology CAN make things better." But after a while of watching the same people apologizing over and over, usually because of the things they said or did while drinking... it began to remind me of "Lord, how often must I forgive my brother from my heart? Seven? Is 7 times enough?" And I even began to see that same question in the face of certain characters on the show, people who were at first glad to hear an apology from someone, only to become fed up with certain people, who seem to need constant forgiveness.

How much of that is real and how much of it is made up for TV? Who knows?

The point is that our lives would be so much better and so much smoother if we simply focused on our identity as Christians... and allowing that identity to inform what we say and do; and where we should be focusing our attention.

I doubt if this message is intended by the producers of the show, but I think it's clear the characters on this show who are most admired by the audience, the crew, and the guests are NOT the train wrecks...or the drama seekers... or the self-righteous. It's the humble characters who hold themselves to a higher standard and try to maintain it. Certainly, they fall short. We all do, But they try... And the lesson is clear to me that they are the happier people for it.

Focus on the things that our Lord wants us to do and on being the kind of people He wants us to be. There are eternal benefits to this, certainly. Primarily... but there are *temporal* benefits as well. God's word has the power to change our lives. And we ought to be listening to it. The Spirit within us hears these words and follows them. And although we still will have a spirit of rebellion that is afraid that following God's rule will mean the end --the destruction-- of that part of us that selfishly clings to an earthly identity and the pleasures of our sinful nature, that spirit of rebellion leads us to a dead end.

There is a surprise for us ahead... Something more, than we even know we could ask for... When you focus on the things of God. And the words of the demon will not spoil what's coming. Jesus is the Holy One of God. And in that Name we are SAVED and HEAVEN is open to us... But I have a suspicion that there is MORE in store for us while we are yet HERE... And it will be revealed when the time is ripe, and while we are doing the work the Lord has set before us to do. Amen