

WITHOUT A CRUTCH
Deut. 18:15-20 / Mk. 1:21-28

The writer of Mark's gospel does not give Jesus a chance to waste time. He gets baptized by John, is being tempted in the wilderness, puts his staff together by calling his disciples, and begins his ministry. All of this in the first twenty verses of Mark's gospel. In this flurry of activity it is easy to miss where it all starts: Jesus's first act of ministry happens in the synagogue, in worship. "They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught ... as one having authority."

Right away, we are confronted with the fact that mere teaching, even if it is done with authority, might be a good start but it is not enough. Words, the gospel writer shows us, are immediately to be followed by actions. Biblical words only have authority when they are consistent with the words of the prophets of old, and when they are congruent with God's desire for healing and wholeness. Jesus models this perfectly. When a person with an "unclean spirit," more about what that might mean later, meets Jesus in the synagogue, he asks, "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 rather than "destroying" this man, Jesus heals him right on the spot.

It is important to note that this story at the beginning of Jesus's ministry is sandwiched between the call story of the disciples and the healing story of Simon's mother-in-law who suffered from a debilitating fever. When Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John to "follow me," he invites them to join him on a journey toward healing. This journey begins in God's house of worship and spills out into the streets from there. As a result, the lame begin to walk, the blind see, lepers and other outcasts are rejoined to their communities, and demons—physical, spiritual and emotional—are cast out.

While Mark does not tell us what exactly it was Jesus taught that day, we know one thing: Jesus, the Word of God, challenges his audience with God's prophetic words. Everybody seems to be puzzled about the authority with which he teaches. However, one man recognizes Jesus's authority right away and he is clearly threatened by it. He is convinced that Jesus is about to do him in. God's word forces this man to acknowledge what he has been pushing away for a long time: that he lived a life which was not pleasing to God. That is really what an "unclean spirit" means. The man is not possessed by a demon nor is he of questionable moral character. He simply does not live by God's word—but deep down, living by what the Holy One of God teaches is his fervent desire.

When I read this story for the umpteenth time, I could recognize myself in the man with the "unclean spirit." I recognized that quite often my actions are not congruent with the words of God I strive to live by. In other words, what I do more often does not match what I say, and vice versa. This bothers me a great deal. It is a thorn in my flesh, as Paul would say. I am frustrated because I cannot overcome this affliction on my own. The late great James Baldwin puts my dilemma succinctly: "Nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch." That is why the man in the synagogue contorts in convulsions after Jesus

extends the gift of healing to him. He wants to be healed—but only on his own terms. When he realizes that God's gift of healing does not abide by his wishes, he literally throws a fit.

Like the man with the “unclean spirit,” I, too, need to ask the Holy One of God, “What do you want from me, Jesus? You’re killing me, man!” I, too, want to be released from my afflictions but letting go of the things that have propped me up throughout my life scares me to death. Having to be divested of my “crutch” is not a comfortable thought. As Carl Jung once said, “People will do anything, no matter how absurd, to avoid facing their own souls … [but] who looks inside, awakes.” In Paul’s language, it sounds something like this: “We have to die to ourselves and live more and more unto Christ.” Letting go of our “crutches,” resurrection, new life, is right around the corner.

Thus, like the man who had not fully oriented his life toward God, all of us need to ask ourselves: What does Jesus want from us? What is it that keeps holding us back on the journey of healing and wholeness which God desires for us all? What is it that holds our family back? What is it that holds us back as a church? What holds us back as a nation to forge a more perfect union? The more we shy away from these questions, the more we twist and turn and contort ourselves to wiggle out of our predicament that such questions cause, the more we want to grab onto our “crutches” for dear life, the more we can be assured that our lives are not consistent with whom God calls us to be and not congruent with what God calls us to do. This dilemma is woven through Mark’s entire gospel. It culminates in chapter 9 where the healing of a little boy prompts the child’s father to exclaim: “I believe! Help my unbelief!”

The man’s struggle in Mark’s gospel is also our struggle. It makes sense because when we face Jesus, we face radical hope. God’s gift of healing and transformation bring blessings and challenges that can be both life-disruptive and life-giving at the same time. The man in the synagogue is rightfully afraid that once he is healed, life as he knows it may change beyond his imagination, which is both scary and exciting. It is also interesting to note that we are not told how the man’s transformation ends and what kind of new life, resurrection life, he leads after Jesus heals him. Which to me says that the process—approaching Jesus, letting go of our “crutches” and struggling with the new life offered to us—is more important than the result.

Faced with the possibility of such radical hope of healing and transformation, how, then, will we respond to God’s gift to us? Will we embrace the unknown with fear and trembling? Will we welcome it with joy and excitement? For me, the answer to these questions is always a both/and, never an either/or. The late Swiss pastor and theologian Karl Barth used to say, this question is both “*Gabe und Aufgabe*,” it is gift and task, never one without the other. Essentially, accepting God’s gift of such new, scary, exciting resurrection life, and actually living by it, is just part of what it means to be human. But God’s gift of hope is not only about individual but also, and perhaps even more importantly, about communal healing and transformation as God’s Spirit works in and through us to usher in God’s

Reign on earth, right here and now, as it is in heaven. So what does Jesus have to do with us? Well, everything.

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