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January 31, 2021 – 4th Sunday after Epiphany
Mark 1:21-28

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want you to think for a moment about first impressions. When you are preparing to meet someone for the first time – maybe for a job interview or the new neighbors that just moved in next door – how will that first impression impact whatever is to come next? I can recall my mom telling me when I was younger, “You will never get a second chance to make a first impression.” How right she is! We live in a world where we so often, and quickly judge others by that initial interaction, which can be for good or for bad.

That is a little bit of what is happening in today’s gospel text in Mark – as we get the first impression of Jesus by the people – and he sure did not disappoint! Each of the gospels introduces Jesus in his public ministry in a different way – essentially a foreshadow of Jesus’ focus and mission as revealed in their account of his life and ministry. In Matthew, Jesus begins with the well-known sermon on the mount – an interpretation of the scriptures, akin to Moses on the mountain top receiving the Law. For Luke, Jesus begins by announcing the words from Isaiah that speak of him being sent by the Lord to proclaim good news, release, healing and freedom, a message that summarizes his ministry even as it is instantly rejected by some. And in John the first thing Jesus does is multiply the wine and blessing at Cana, living into the abundant grace declared in the poetic opening words of that gospel. Yet for Mark, Jesus’ first actions leave the crowds amazed at his teaching with authority, even as he casts out an evil spirit.

This first impression of Jesus makes it clear that he comes to God’s people – not just with the “head” knowledge about the scriptures, but with the ability to

interpret these holy words for their lives. Jesus doesn't just give them the background story or factual data in his teaching. He can proclaim what God is doing through those ancient words and then explain what that means God cares about in their lives now. This is what causes them to be amazed – because even if they did not yet know how to articulate what was happening – Jesus was interpreting the scriptures to point to himself and the work of salvation that he had come to do. And in the midst of that authoritative teaching, he stops to put those words into real action – as he healed this man from the unclean spirit. You would think that this miracle alone would get people's attention – but they were already transfixed on his teaching alone.

It is these two actions together – the teaching with authority and casting out evil – that sets the tone for Jesus' ministry in Mark. Jesus has come to help people understand the new thing that God is doing – and to oppose any force that seeks to destroy God's people – anything that would keep them separated from God – anything that would deprive them of the joy and abundant life that God has designed for them. Apparently, it made a good impression on them – because they appear enthralled by Jesus – astounded and amazed by what he is doing – so much so that his fame quickly spreads throughout the region.

So what happened next? If he was so well received in these early days of his ministry, why didn't things play out differently for him a few years later? Why hasn't the world been completely transformed by his amazing teaching and miraculous acts? The answer to these questions lies in the fact that Jesus' life, death and resurrection did bring about salvation for the world – but the full realization of God's kingdom is still yet to come. Christ's life-giving sacrifice on the cross defeated the forces of evil and sin that separate us from God, but we still live in a broken world that is plagued by unclean spirits, which seek to once again drive a wedge between us and God. Whether it is the many idols that try and take priority in our lives – success, power, safety, health, security – or the emotional struggles that weigh us down – fear, depression, loneliness, shame, anger, doubt – or the brokenness that infects our relationships because of racism, sexism, violence, intolerance of other's beliefs, political strife – as Jesus' disciples in this world, we face all kinds of temptations and sins that distract and draw us away from God's will and plan for our lives.

Which is perhaps why so much of Jesus' ministry was focused on teaching (as well as the life of the early church which captured much of those teachings into our scriptures). Jesus was preparing God's people for the long haul of the life of discipleship. He knew, more than anyone, that the path of faithfulness to God is less like a tiptoe through the tulips, and more like the grind of pushing a boulder up a steep hill. The call of discipleship is not to be safe and comfortable, but to be

faithful to the work of God's kingdom here and now – wherever that might lead us to be.

This raises some questions – both as an individual and as a member of the Body of Christ in whatever faith community you find yourself – “What first impression are you making on behalf of God's Kingdom?” “What are we being called to do as Jesus' follower and worker in the Kingdom?” “What gifts has God entrusted to us and how can we use those to further the spread of God's grace, love and forgiveness?” As you think about answers to any of those questions – I want you to know that I don't expect that any one of us will be able to change the world on our own. In fact, I am certain, that the fate of the world isn't going to be changed by some single, huge act (Jesus already did that one). No, God's kingdom will continue to break forth in this world through a thousand small actions – done by you and me and your neighbor down the road. Look again to today's story – Jesus changed the life of one man in this story – not the whole world. To most, it had little to no impact on their lives. But to that man who was healed – it changed everything.

As we go forth into a new week – and continue to move through these COVID times into the new day where God is leading us – we know that there will be challenges and celebrations ahead. We know that those evil forces will fight and oppose the work of God's Kingdom that we are called to do. But we also know that God's Spirit empowers us to be the hands and feet and voice of grace and love for our neighbor. We know that one small act of kindness can multiply and spread faster than any virus can. Our first impressions can be the way that someone comes to know the joy and goodness of God in their life, as God's Kingdom is breaking forth in this world through me and through you. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of God's People

Guided by Christ made known to the nations, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all people in need.

For all who share the gospel and proclaim freedom in Christ throughout the world: prophets, teachers, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders; for the church and its ministries,

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For all God's works in creation: plants and animals, water and soil, forests and farms; and for those tasked with protecting our natural resources and all that exists, Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For government and leaders: cities and nations, rescue professionals and legal aid attorneys, elected officials and grassroots organizers; for all responsible for the well-being of civil society, Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For those who suffer in mind, body, or spirit: those who are sick and hospitalized, those living with HIV/AIDS, all suffering from COVID-19, those struggling with mental illness, those who are hungry or homeless, and all in any need; for caregivers, hospice workers, doctors, nurses, and home health aides,

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For the covenant God made with us in the waters of baptism, in thanksgiving for the baptized who have died in faith,

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who dwells among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior.

Amen.

Let us join our voices together in the prayer that Jesus taught us... Our Father, who art in heaven... Amen

God the creator strengthen you;

Jesus the beloved fill you;

and the Holy Spirit the comforter ✝ keep you in peace.

Amen.