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THE POWER OF A WORD

Mark 1:21-28

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Mark's gospel operates on a multiplicity of levels. The first layer presents Jesus as the one who is not subject to the powers of darkness but has the authority to banish them with a word. Later in the gospel, we will encounter a demon so strong that even chains cannot bind it but, without any effort, Jesus banishes it.

Mark means to show us that the words of Jesus, sometimes just a single word, can change the lives of those around him. His words have power in the physical world, whether it is exorcising demons or taming the chaotic forces of nature. But even more, they have spiritual power imbued with a deep wisdom that leaves crowd's heads spinning.

In fact, we are told the crowd was astonished. Not only because he was some nobody from Nazareth, but as Mark wrote, "He taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes."

Personally, I love learn-ed lectures. I listen to them every night as I go to sleep. Whether it is about Einstein's Relativity, The Geological History of the Earth, or the Vikings, professors of great learning, citing the best minds in the history of the world, is nearly an intoxicating experience for me. It's my drug of choice.

But there are times that wisdom penetrates even deeper. It is those moments when someone speaks directly from their experience, a revelation and knowledge unique to them, expressing fundamental truths about the world, shared in a manner never heard before.

I remember hearing one catholic brother describing his prayer time with God. He said, it was like being assumed into "a sapphire light". Such a notion astounded me with its alluring imagery I had

never heard nor imaged of such an experience. It completely changed my prayer life.

That was how Jesus spoke.

This is why the crowd comments that his teaching is unlike the scribes.

The synagogue was a place of prayer and reading, of intellectual exploration of the Torah, the law of God. It is thought to have emerged in the time of exile in Babylon when the temple was inaccessible. It was the people's place. And soon God would give more power to the people.

As I said at the beginning, Mark's gospel operates on many levels and, even as he tells of Jesus' power to change individual lives, he shows us his mission to strip the powers of his time.

(This is what makes the Bible so incredible. A single person can pick it up and find meaning, hope, and grace for their life. And a group of people can pick it up and change the world.)

"An unclean spirit *in the Synagogue*" – this should be our first clue that this passage is not simply about the literal exorcism of demons to the netherworld. Rather, this passage marks the beginning of Jesus' mission to dismantle the established religion of his day. The unclean were entirely forbidden from being in public spaces, much less in the synagogue. Very soon in Mark's gospel we will encounter a series of confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities. This "unclean spirit" is a not-so-veiled insult for the dogmatic approach to God controlled by the priests, the pharisees, and the scribes that use religion to consolidate power and control the people.

The key is found not only in the man's presence in the synagogue but the question the spirit asks Jesus, "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?" Jesus spends considerably more time dismantling the religion of his day than battling demonic forces.

The "us" in this quote are the authorities. Notice Jesus does not answer the question! He does not want the crowd or other authorities to know his plan yet, so his first word to the demon is "Be silent!"

One of his primary aims is to abolish the purity system that allows the ruling class to maintain economic and spiritual control of the people. This exorcism is the first act in this regard; for once the demon is gone, the man is freed to be in community once again. This inclusive mission of Christ, to break down the dividing walls of culture, gender, economics, and purity will be a strong theme carried throughout Mark's gospel.

Jesus came to dismantle the outdated way of connecting to the divine, that woodenly maintained the letter of the law, but not the Spirit. You will remember the stories of Jesus getting in trouble for healing on the Sabbath. In fact, in only a few years after Mark's writing, the Temple is destroyed, and the priestly role within the Jewish faith fades away and is replaced with a more egalitarian, rabbinic Judaism. The shift was from a priest with a special, unique connection to God, who performed rituals in order to cleanse sins to a Rabbi, that is teacher, who enjoins the people into a deeper faith. It is not possible for us to overstate the seismic shift this was within the Jewish faith.

Throughout history, God has needed to reform the faith. As renowned religious author Phyllis Tickle explains in her book, *The Great Emergence*, every 500 years or so the church needs a rummage sale, to clean out the detritus of practice and doctrine that undermines the purposes of God.

She asserts that we are in such a time now and I think she is correct. It begins with a pruning. The institutional church has been shrinking for decades. We lost our way, perhaps because we became more worried about the church than the mission of God.

Clay Christen, who passed away this year, was a renowned business guru and professor at Harvard business school. He pioneered the notion of "disruptive innovation." As *The New York Times* explains, "He broke ground with his assertion that the factors that helped the best companies succeed were also the reasons some of those same companies failed." This is precisely the reason for the decline of the PC(USA). Our institutional mastery of the 1950's world is no longer relevant in today's world.

But, despite this challenge, Professor Christensen still believes religion is a critical factor for our country as did the Founding Fathers – and Mothers. A few years ago, a Chinese exchange student at Harvard Business school shared with professor Christensen a unique feature of past American life. "Americans chose to follow the laws because there weren't just accountable to society, they were accountable to God," He said. Professor Christensen then shares a worry. "As religion loses its influence over the lives of Americans what will happen to our democracy...Because if you take away religion you can't hire enough police." As religion has eroded in our country, we have tried to combat our problems with more police and prisons and only made the matters worse.

The identity of the church as primarily an institution has faded, thankfully. But we are experiencing the pain as a country of not yet discovering God's new plan for the church. Though Christianity benefited from the old paradigm it also enabled us to leave people behind.

I asked a group of people in a Bible study what news factors they have seen emerging over the decades to help us see God's plan. For Jesus'

ministry is not simply a retread of old times, but something new, entirely new. In Mark, the crowd is astonished as they say, "What is this? A *new* teaching!" The word used here for "new", is not *neos* which means recent, but *kainos*, which describes a qualitative newness never seen before.

Their answer, while obvious, was profound in helping to see God's new plan for the church. Women, ordained women are the new factor in the church. Women pastors were brought in a critical time when the institutional decline was about to begin. They have had led the way in shifting the church from a hierarchical, authority-based rule to a more nurturing, relational paradigm. Women in ministry have showed us how we can shift from the institutional and politically based to the existential within the communal. That is a radical fundamental transformation of individual hearts that find their growth and life within an incredibly tight-knit, loving community of fellowship and grace.

This was precisely the shift Jesus began in his time.

The new paradigm is becoming clearer and, of course, it is not something new. We are commencing a continuation of the work Christ began so long ago.

We find ourselves divided and in turmoil in this decade because the church failed. We failed to take his ministry far enough. In the 1970's we worked to help establish laws of equality and justice. Though things improved, we can see they did not go nearly far enough. The new change that is needed is rooted in something more fundamental than law. We begin with the law, but we must not end there.

If a democracy cannot hire enough police without religion's influence, as Professor Christensen so persuasively argued, then it is equally true that unless religion changes *hearts*, we can never create enough laws to forge lasting equality.

For Jesus was about something that goes beyond equality to relationality. It is the ministry of radical community in which EVERYONE, *everyone*, EVERYONE, is welcomed to the table. And not just as an idea but realized, in fact, in which there are no more barriers between people and we naturally and instinctively share our lives.

The shift is from institutional into the harmonic, in which the church seeks to forge a harmony across all creation. A harmony that looks like God's Kingdom of shalom, forged by Christ, in which we are one with each other, one with ourselves, one with the earth, and most of all one with our Lord.

Jesus came to dismantle the old ways, to forge a God-sized vision for the church and the world. We are beginning to see that same vision for our time, a path for a better world. I am beginning to believe it is not only possible but on the precipice of becoming reality. Amen.