

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Gospel, Year B

MAKING UNCLEAN SPIRITS SHUT UP

Mark 1:21-28

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Fred Niedner

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.

DIAGNOSIS: Mistaking Good News for Something Much Less

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Hearing What We Want to Hear

Every week we come to the sacred space at the appointed, sacred time, hoping that today we'll hear not only the local scribe's new take on all things biblical, but something that will give us hope, something to cling to, some good news. This new teacher, the guest from Nazareth, offers just what we want. "The time has come! The kingdom of God has come near!" he proclaims. Yes! We love it. We've waited so long. At last, God will have God's way,

and Israel will be great again. We will prosper. The bloody foreigners will be sent packing—and bleeding. Let's get started!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Second Thoughts, Confounding Words

But wait. There's an unclean person, possessed by an unclean, divisive, self-serving spirit, right here in the sacred space on the sacred day. This ought not so to be!! He interrupts the sermon and makes a scene. (Why, oh why, do some of our number insist that we use part of our space as a homeless shelter on the nights before services? This was bound to happen. How embarrassing!) The unclean fellow calls the guest "God's Holy One." The anointed. But he doesn't sound happy to see or hear the long-awaited one, if indeed, it's him. Thankfully, the new preacher shut him up, or down. So give him that, anyway. His words have power, authority.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Mortified

The scene proves worse than embarrassing. It's mortifying. The unclean spirit has clearly seized more than merely the crazy guy we sheltered. All of us find ourselves in its grip. And though we can't yet see it all clearly, we sense that this new preacher's message announces the end of all our dreams. If this fellow is indeed "the Holy One," we will never be great again, not in the way we want. The foreigners will never leave, and it's our own blood that will seep into the soil if this new preacher has his way. He preaches repentance, not resurgence, revenge, and rebellion. This "Holy One of God" has the look of a doomed messiah, and he'll take us down with him. We know what he's up to, and we hate it. (Crucify him!) Our words condemn us.

PROGNOSIS: The Kingdom of God Has Come Near

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Mortified

Although he shut down other spirits who outed him as he roamed

Galilee, and he silenced the raging sea with the same word that shut up the unclean synagogue invader, soon enough the new teacher from Nazareth heads toward Jerusalem, the place where showdowns happen. He invites along anyone who wishes to come, although he says you'll need to bring a cross if you choose to join him. Sure enough, the "kingdom" he proclaims comes to pass there, and the authority he wields prove to come from the certainty of how that kingdom of God will come about. The unclean spirit's minions hand him over, and the empire enthrones him as King of the Jews—the messiah. And only when he has breathed his last, someone, an enemy soldier no less, can see and declare who he truly is, and what kind of king. The soldier says what the voice from heaven had announced at the river Jordan. "The Son of God, that's who this is!" We, too, chastened now, see him die in the place we all die—in the darkness, abandoned, his prayers unanswered, just like ours. We'll never be great again. But oddly enough, this means the unclean spirit has failed completely. We are not driven apart, haplessly scattered into the hands of self-serving emperors. We're ALL in the same boat, moribund and mortified, with him. And nothing can change that, or separate us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Dying and Rising, Together

Exactly what we once feared has come to pass. This "Holy One," this messiah, takes us all down with him. We die, which, of course, we were going to do anyway. No one gets out of here alive, remember? But in the kingdom of God that this curious Holy One's cruciform coronation commences, we all die with him, every day, in baptism and the daily renewal thereof as we "repent and believe the gospel."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Exercising His Authority

Because we, too, walk the way of the cross every day, we now

speak with his authority, and not as mere scribes. We silence the unclean spirits that haunt us continually, baptized or not, and that make their way into our gathering places to shout out their fears and resistance. We use our rebuking words on ourselves, and on the unclean spirits we cultivate on the sly and invite into our assemblies and relationships. When it comes to the uncleanness that afflicts others, with the authority of the crucified, we touch and embrace them, no longer fearing uncleanness ourselves. Some days, we even sing with the enemy—centurions, no less.