

"And the people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority.... And immediately there was... (In his audience) a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out... 'I know who you are...'" "He taught them as one who had authority."

Jesus' invitation to the kingdom is radical and overwhelms the feelings of the people he meets. Along with the four fishermen that he called to service from last week's story, Jesus begins his "kingdom campaign," inviting the neediest of the people he meets to follow him. Not the "brightest and the best," not the wealthiest and most powerful or important, but those who have the greatest need. He comes to desolate places, places where we all find ourselves at times-no matter how strong and important we would like to think of ourselves and no matter how we may wish to be looked upon by others.

So that is how Mark's stories are told. They are short stories that Mark wants to present as a model of the gospel. Separately and together, they offer us this beautiful and often urgent invitation to the kingdom. The first 3 stories are progressively structured in function of the stories settings: the Jewish synagogue, through the Christian house, to the villages or towns of the regions where the gospel needs to be proclaimed.

The texts are linked by desolation: the leper (1:40-45), the paralyzed man/sinner (2:1-12), and the publican (2:13-17). All 3 of these people are outcasts from society. The synagogue represents a place of public prayer,

the house as a place of private life, and the door, the square, as a place of public life.

In today's place, the synagogue, the religious space, the kingdom is embodied in Jesus' communication skills-his *words* are the action. "He taught them as one who has authority." And when he gets there, we find a story within a story-the "impure" man, possessed by a devil or an unclean spirit. Jesus recognizes this being, and the unclean spirit recognizes him-the unclean spirits always do. I believe that may be why he gets in so much trouble-he is a real threat to things and people who are not whole, who need to be healed. And he causes the unclean spirit to speak.

In Jesus' day people quickly recognized the reality and power of evil spirits and demons. Strange and aberrant behavior, pathological and some physical illnesses were considered a result of evil spiritual powers. The earth was a frightening place, a hell, where every life situation was ruled by these demonic spirits. Archaeologists have uncovered thousands of skulls with holes drilled in them that show growth after such drilling. Such drilling was thought to release evil spirits from the head. Jesus' authority over this demon amazes the people, for only God has control in this dark arena.¹

¹ Pearson, Sharon Ely. *The Prayer Book Guide to Christian Education*. Church Publishing,

Jesus goes to this place to teach by healing. His gospel here is a healing word and action. “Be silent and come out of him.”

Power from the forces of evil manipulates our spirits and cripples them. But the forces of evil are not submissive or indifferent to Jesus. They are disrupted, and they do as he commands. They leave. The term “authority” is understood in the strong sense of divine power-exousia-and it is this manner that Jesus conveys later on (3:14-15) when he sends his disciples to preach and cast out demons on their own.

Naming the demons means knowing the demons . . . The Gospels imply that anyone who exorcises cannot be a stranger to demons . . . To have faced our demons is never to forget their power to hurt and never to forget the power to heal that lies in touching broken-heartedness . . . Jesus hears, below the demon noises, an anguished cry for deliverance.²

And it is with the same authority that Jesus sends us as well. We intervene when we see injustices happening, not because we ourselves are powerful or important or even wish to have people look up to us. It is because Jesus has given us, through our Baptismal Covenant, the authority to pick up our cross and to follow him in his way.

² Brock, Rita Nakashima *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Crossroad Publishing, 1988).

To stand up for people who cannot always stand up for themselves; to lend a hand, to listen, and to share whatever time, talents, and treasures we have. In our worship, we constantly ask to be delivered from evil when we recite the Lord's Prayer. This is also stated in today's Eucharistic Prayer B: "In him, you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you." – a vivid reminder that Christ's presence in the Eucharist stands between evil and us today.

And people are amazed, and even puzzled with this kind of authority. God is present and acts in our world through the teaching and through the Word that provides healing.

There are so many voices. "Be careful. Beware! Don't get involved. I'm only one person, what difference can I make? I have enough to do already." Or: "I'm afraid of standing out from the crowd." Among so many voices there is one Voice. There are so many words, some of them false words of unholy power. But there is only one true Word that binds up the broken hearted and liberates us all from the forces of evil and makes our world not only meaningful and just, but a joyful foretaste of the eternal world to come.

When we listen to God's commands and we act according to God's authority, then we too become instruments of healing as well. Then we are guided to create spaces of freedom and places of healing and communion.