

The freedom that Jesus offers
Mark 1:21-28

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Our gospel today brings us to an exciting time in Jesus' ministry which has just begun. He has called four of his disciples. He has taught in the synagogue. People are astounded by his teaching. And now a healing - a man with an unclean spirit. When we hear unclean spirit, we wonder what that means – someone possessed by a demon as in the movie the Exorcist or someone who is mentally ill. There is no way to know exactly what state this man was in 2000 years later, but I did like Bishop Wright's take. He writes "When we see those two words in scripture it means a demonic spirit. A spirit that is not love. A spirit that opposes God. A spirit that harms the community and the host."

It is interesting that the man has plenty to say when the unclean spirit is still with him, but after he is healed, we hear nothing more from him. It is those who are around who are amazed and asking – what is this – a new teaching with authority.

I found myself wondering how the man who was healed felt after being released from the burden of the unclean spirit. During our Wednesday evening service, I asked people how he might have felt. They said – free, happy, joyous. I asked them how they would feel if they were in the same place – that Jesus had come along and freed them from all that weighed them down. They began to smile and said how wonderful it would be. I reminded them that Jesus too offers all of us this freedom.

We can get so weighed down and burdened with spirits that oppose God, that get in the way of what God intends for us. We endure addiction, abuse, fear, illness and much more. It is hard to believe Jesus offers freedom. Often, we don't even think it is possible. When it is offered we yell out like the man did. How is Jesus going to help me with this? This burden isn't going anywhere. I'm stuck with it.

We may even sabotage avenues of healing that come our way - therapy, a friend inviting us to walk, a new job, or a new treatment. Those who are trying to help those who suffer from addiction or domestic violence know this pattern well. Even in the midst of our disbelief, our challenges and our sabotage, Jesus offers each and every one the freedom from what binds us down. There is a reason AA talks about a higher power. In so many circumstances, we cannot free ourselves.

I find the first words Jesus says to the man so powerful – Be silent. And perhaps we need to hear Jesus saying these words to us – Be silent. Stop with all the excuses, the reasons why you can't be freed and have your burden lifted. "Be silent and come out of him."

I would change Jesus' words to us today to "Be silent and come and see. Be quiet for a moment. I know you have your objections and all your well thought out reasons as to why it is impossible for your burdens to be lifted, but be silent for a moment and see what I can do." Can we do that? Do we dare do that? Can we stop for a moment and

believe that Jesus can free us? Know that we might be freed in a way that we could not have imagined.

I've just finished a book called "A Knock at Midnight" about an attorney's fight to reduce the sentences and free those who were given life sentences in the 1990's for relatively minor non-violent drug charges. This was back when it was believed that crack was 100 times more addictive than cocaine and sentencing formulas were changed to reflect that. That isn't true by the way – crack and cocaine are equally addictive. The attorney, Brittany K. Barnett, describes one client in particular who was serving life and she comments on the resilience of the woman's spirit. The first time she met her client in person she described her as radiant, warm and gracious when she had been expecting bitter or sad. Visit after visit as the book went on, she gave similar descriptions of her in jail. Over their long fight to her freedom, sometimes the client would be the one bringing the hope. But even in jail, day in and day out, not knowing if she would ever leave, there was a freedom about her - a spirit of hope. Her client was a person of faith and I believe the spirit of Jesus made it possible for her to keep finding hope in terrible conditions and with all the odds against her.

Jesus offers freedom both spiritual and physical. Do we have the courage to show up and see what it could be? Will we let our objections be silenced by Jesus' voice and be vulnerable to the freedom Jesus has for us?

Take some time to be in the presence of Jesus today and lay your burdens down. Name them. Write them down. Then be silent. Take deep breaths and breathe in the spirit of God and listen. Listen and be aware of what Jesus might be offering. Do it again the next day and the day after that. And when Jesus offers you the way – trust that path and step into it. Jesus can free us and send us out into this world to amaze and astound those around us.