

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

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Swiffling Disordered Lives

Mark 1:21-28

I can't help but wonder what Jesus said or did to set that guy in the synagogue off. Perhaps you wonder about that as well. I mean there he was, a young rabbi teaching in the synagogue, perhaps for the first time, when all of a sudden one of the people blew a gasket. Oh, I know. We think the man was crazy, mentally ill, or something like that. And maybe he was. But maybe he was an ordinary person like you and me who objected to what Jesus said. After all, not everybody agrees with the preacher all the time, at least that's what I've been told. To be sure, we're not accustomed to such an outburst in worship. If someone started pitching such a fit, we'd think he'd lost his mind, or was possessed by a demon. My guess is those folks in that Synagogue weren't any more accustomed to such outbursts than we. Yet there he was in the midst of them, screaming at Jesus. I wonder what Jesus said that set him off?

Luke of course tells us what Jesus said in the synagogue at Nazareth. It's not the same story as this one, but it might give us a clue to Jesus' early preaching. Luke tells us that Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll. Further, Luke says, "All spoke well of him," Sounds like what Mark says, "They were astounded at his teaching." Listen to them talking among themselves. "What a nice young man he is!" "And such authority! Not like anyone we've heard before." "But... isn't that Joseph's son? Who does he think he is, anyway?" Then Jesus said something that really made them angry, so angry Luke says that they wanted to throw him off a cliff. That was in Nazareth. This is Capernaum. We don't know what Jesus said in Capernaum, but everybody was impressed. Then one of them flew into a rage.

Screaming at Jesus, he wanted to know what Jesus was up to. "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." Notice the demon didn't ask, "Have you come to destroy me?" He saw Jesus as a threat, not only to himself, but also to the people. "Have you come to destroy us?" He challenged.

In the Old Testament story we read last week the widow of Zeraphath whose son was dead attacked Elijah in similar fashion: "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" (1Kgs. 17:18) You can't miss the similarities between the two stories. In one a grieving mother anguished by the death of her son verbally attacked the man of God. In the other a man angered by something Jesus said verbally attacks the Son of God, practically quoting that widow of Zeraphath.

We might ignore that coincidence except that in Nazareth Jesus' was talking about Elijah and that same widow when the people flew into a rage. These parallels we find in Scripture are no accident. We have a strange interweaving of stories; an interweaving that intends to confront us with the Gospel, that new teaching Jesus taught with such authority. Something about Jesus calls to mind Elijah, the one who was to bring in the messianic age. Elijah, you'll remember, healed the woman's son. And Jesus, in this story, heals the man possessed by an unclean spirit. In both cases, the Holy One was perceived as a threat. And in both cases the Holy One brought healing and hope.

What is it that Jesus says that threatens people? Perhaps you think that is an odd question for me to ask. But I wonder. Do you suppose that properly understood, you and I might object to Jesus' message? I mean we come to the Scriptures with our own set of assumptions. Most of us, I suspect, think we understand pretty well what Jesus has called us to do. But we rarely hear Jesus calling us to renounce our way of life, or to change our ways. Oh we hear the word, Repent! I know that. But most of us simply claim that we've already done that and go on about our business.

Someone told me about a preacher who accepted a new call. She preached a powerful sermon that impressed everybody. The next week, she preached the same sermon. The next week, and the next week, and the next week, same sermon. The elders approached her and asked why she was preaching the same sermon week after week. She replied, "I don't see any evidence that you've heard what I've said. I'll keep preaching it until you take it seriously and change your ways." They asked her to leave the next week. It was easier to get rid of her than to let her call them to a new life.

I can't help but wonder what demons we might need to have exorcised. No, I'm not into demonology. I don't care to run around seeing everybody as possessed. And yet, what if we and our whole society have been possessed by a demon named "Greed." I can't speak for you, but it seems to me we have all fallen into the trap of believing we need all the stuff we possess. I looked around the other day. Carol and I have two cars, one house with three bedrooms and two bathrooms. That house is equipped with the usual kitchen and laundry appliances plus an additional two refrigerators, a bread machine, two coffee makers, several televisions, an I-pod, three computers, a swimming pool with spa, two pool heaters, several alarm clocks, a couple of closets stuffed with stuff, one closet jammed full of clothes, some of which we couldn't wear if we had to, more pairs of shoes than I can count, and well you get the point. Some people actually rent storage facilities to hold all the stuff they can't fit into their overly stuffed houses.

I know! I'm starting to sound old fashioned. Hmm. I wonder if there isn't another demon around here, one named, "Modern." Or perhaps his name is, "Financial Security." What happens to us, anyway, when someone like Jesus comes along and tells us our lifestyle is destroying us and taking the world down with it? Is it possible, for example, that the real crisis we face these days is not economic, but spiritual? Could it be that we have been possessed by the demon named "Financial Security?" If so, then we might get really angry at Jesus when he calls us to repent, to quit hanging on so tightly to our possessions, and follow him.

Do I think we need to get rid of all our stuff? No! But I hear Christ calling us to become less attached to it, less dependent on the life style we take for granted, less obsessed with the Dow Jones Average, less anxious about our portfolios, and more eager to serve him. Repent, Jesus says. Which means nothing less than swiffling out our stuff and turning to a new way of life, a Christ-like way. Repent. Our possessions don't make our disordered lives secure. It is God in Christ who set us free to love God and to love our neighbors. It is Christ Jesus who commands the demons to be silent, to come out of us and be gone.

At that table Christ feeds us abundantly. Come, taste and see the goodness of our Lord.