

Whitefish UMC
 February 1, '09
 Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
 Mark 1:21-28

Come off it and listen

Millionaire Steve Fosset's name was briefly back in the news again last fall. DNA evidence proved it was indeed his body that was recovered in the wreckage of a small plane found in the rugged Nevada wilderness. Do you remember twelve years ago when this same dare-devil pilot safely landed his high-altitude silver balloon in a field of mustard and wheat in a rural area of northern India, and how applauding villagers greeted him with garlands in the way practicing Hindus still today pay their respects to divinity? They thought he was their monkey God Hanuman fallen from the sky.

So two thousand years ago, when Jesus silenced an unruly member of the Capernaum congregation it also was only natural that onlookers took it as a sign that he was driving demons out of the man. After all, that was the way people thought in those days. And it's likely that Jesus thought that way too.

"Everyone there was incredulous," Mark says, in Peterson's paraphrase. "What's going on here?" they marveled. "A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and sends them packing!"

What Jesus had said was, "Quiet! Get out of him!" Or, at least that's what Peterson reports. And so do most other translators. Yet their exact wording may be the product of translators' license because some of the earliest, and therefore most reliable, manuscripts have Jesus simply say, "Be silent and come out!" That's all. "Come out *of him*" may have been added by later editors who were already convinced that Jesus saw this man as a case of demon-possession. In their minds the noise everybody heard was the sound protesting demons made as they were being expelled from the man's body.

But would you and I have been convinced by that explanation? Probably not! In *our* view today human illness, no matter how bizarre the symptoms, isn't caused by demons. We look rather for physiological and biological and psychological explanations. The notion of demon-possession went out with the Salem witch trials, for which most of us would say, "Thank God!"

So what was really going on that day, when this man suddenly interrupted Jesus in the midst of his Sabbath teaching? According to the Greek text of Mark's Gospel, what the man literally shouted out was, "What to us and to you, Nazarene Jesus?" There is no verb at all in this Greek sentence. The verb is simply implied.

And there is a further problem. Only in rare instances does the next Greek verb mean “to destroy,” as in “Have you come to destroy us?” More often than not the verb means, “to set us free,” or “to cut us loose,” or even “to divorce us.” So what this man really seems to be asking Jesus is, “Have you come to set us free? Have you come to bring us liberation from our bondage?” Taken at face value it is the sort of question that could be politically very awkward for Jesus if he were to come right out and answer it. Just think of what would happen were this question, and Jesus’ answer to it, to come to Herod’s ear, or Pilot’s, or the high priest’s. Consider where that would put Jesus. It almost certainly would get him arrested. Yet here in Capernaum Jesus is just beginning his public ministry. He isn’t ready yet for a confrontation with the authorities.

So what does Jesus say to the man? Peterson translates it this way: “Quiet! Get out of him!” But you know what? One can just as accurately translate into English Jesus’ answer as, “Quiet! Come off it!” After all, here is a man who has just confessed his faith in Jesus – “I know who you are: the Holy One of God!” Could not Jesus be saying to him, “Hey, not now, friend; keep that understanding to yourself; back off of this kind of public pronouncement.” I wonder. At least it’s worth our thinking about.

In Peterson’s translation Mark sets up the story this way: “Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he (that is, Jesus) was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out....” However, the NRSV uses language more familiar to us: “There was in their synagogue a man in unclean spirit.” The Greek word rendered into English as “unclean” is the same root from which our English word “catharsis” is derived, meaning to cleanse or purify. To psychologists, something is cathartic that relieves tension and anxiety. Whenever catharsis happens there’s a kind of purifying or cleansing of our emotions. In everyday speech we might say that sometimes in order to get straightened out we first have to purge ourselves of the crud that’s been mucking up our lives. We’ve got to clean it out and dump it somewhere. The only difference back in Jesus’ day was that this same “therapy” was held to be universally applicable. That is to say, people back then thought that whenever a person was afflicted with any kind of ailment – from a common cold to a psychological disorder -- he or she always had to find some kind of catharsis, some way of being “made clean again.”

But now ponder with me that little figure of speech just a moment longer. Here was this guy who had come to church, so to speak, come into the synagogue “in unclean spirit.” At some time or other hasn’t this happened to all of us? Haven’t all of us come to Sabbath worship “in unclean spirit” -- chewing on some deep resentment, struggling with some long-standing sense of guilt, more inclined to bite the greeter’s head off on a particular morning when we are handed a bulletin than to grasp his/her hand and shake it warmly? Do you suppose this man was the only worshipper in that Capernaum synagogue that day who had come “in unclean spirit?” We all know better, don’t we? What is it

that we often say about church – that it is meant to be a hospital for sinners, but we've made it a retirement home for saints? At least this man had the grace not to cover up his feelings of vulnerability as Jesus was speaking! He knew that the sermon applied to him! "What have you to do with us, Nazarene Jesus?" he cried out. "Have you come to set us free?"

Yet everybody else in the synagogue that day had diagnosed this guy as abnormal, maybe even crazy, and in that diagnosis had already disvalued him! It was known to everybody, apparently, that he had an unclean spirit. It was demons that made him behave so peculiarly. But how was it that Jesus saw him? Do we know? Did Jesus think of him as sick, as some kind of a fruitcake?

Dr. Karl Hammarschlag, a psychiatrist, tells about one of his patients – a boy named Oren. The teenager was already on his second probationary violation when he was caught by a security patrol on the roof of a new home construction site. This time, instead of being sent to a detention center, he was hospitalized. And that's when Karl saw him.

"Oren wasn't a bad kid." Karl remembers. "He wasn't dumb, either. He tested out normal; he wasn't cruel, hostile, or antisocial. Before seeing me, he'd been evaluated by a variety of learning specialists including child psychiatrists, psychologists, and testing experts. They diagnosed him as hyperactive, depressed, and suffering from a serious 'personality disorder.' They prescribed a variety of drugs, none of which had any real impact on him.

"I saw no evidence of any of these diagnoses," says Karl. "Oren was naïve, easily influenced, and made poor choices, but there was no evidence of major mental illness.

"At the family meeting a week after his admission, his father wanted to know what Oren had. I told them he didn't belong in a psychiatric hospital; I also told them I didn't even think he needed medication. His father persisted: "What does he have? What is his problem? What do you call it?" Diagnoses, I said, are important only if they provide a specific treatment strategy. But the father demanded an answer: "What does he have?"

"Exasperated, I finally said, 'He's just a schmuck.' There was a stunned silence, then his father broke into a grin and asked, stunned, 'He's just a schmuck?'

"He's just a schmuck,' I laughed. 'That's it.'

"His father said, 'I always knew that, but I thought maybe I was missing something because everybody was making it into a disease. A schmuck. A schmuck I can deal with.'" And he did," says Karl. "After Oren's discharge, he went to an adventure-based summer program for kids in trouble, where he

learned how to determine which friends he could trust with his life. He also learned how to depend on himself. Then he changed schools and did pretty well. Oren learned about being a schmuck is not a disease and that most of us grow out of it.”

And here comes this psychiatrist’s parting observation, which just may be the point of contact between Oren’s story and this story in the gospel. “The great danger in giving things names in psychiatric practice,” says Hammarschlag, “is that we get the exaggerated conviction that when we have named something we also know how to deal with it. Diagnostic certainty is too often a way of convincing patients of our power and minimizing theirs (The Theft of the Spirit, pp.143-134)!”

So, you see, maybe, just maybe what really happened there in the Capernaum synagogue that day was that by directly confronting this obnoxious, hurting individual Jesus finally got him to lay hold of the power that had always been within his grasp. Maybe what this man really heard Jesus say to him was, “Quiet, man! Come off it! Quit living off of what other people are telling you you are!” For if this man was possessed by a demon, perhaps it was only in the sense that, like some of the rest of us, he had surrendered to what other people thought of him, while what he really needed was to start doing what young Oren had to learn to do – namely to take responsibility for his own life.

Most of the time when someone says to you, “O shut up, be still,” the message is insulting and abusive. But it isn’t always so. In this little story, Jesus may be demonstrating that there is nothing intrinsically bad about being told to move into silence. On the contrary, there are times when that may just be what we most need to do. Silence exists as a playground for the spirit, a building site for our own renewal. When we are silent, for a while, silent for a change, when we really do stop, sometimes it is only then that we listen. And when we listen, and don’t just go on jabbering, accusing others of messing up our world, we put ourselves in a place where we just may be able to hear the word that God has been offering to us all along, the word that has the power to bring us healing.

So maybe this morning that’s what you need. Do you suppose? Someone who isn’t afraid to say to you as you come here into God’s presence in unclean spirit, “Quiet now!”

For in these moments, before this Table, in this very room, I have something to say to you. Come out from wherever you are in your life, from all of your fears and public posturings and, for just this once, come off it and listen. I, Jesus, can make you whole.

“There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”

Mark Hayes has put that traditional spiritual into a contemporary arrangement. I want to sing it for you now....

