

***“Have You Come to Destroy Us?”***

In the name of the Holy One, the Son of God, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel reading reminds us that Jesus was a very provocative preacher. He expounded the Holy Scriptures in such a way that it forced his hearers to think, to reflect, and to respond – often *forcefully* – one way or the other – either positively or negatively. We saw that last week, when we heard how Jesus was rejected by the people of his hometown of Nazareth. The folks in the synagogue there were so enraged by his sermon message that they rose as a vigilante mob, grabbed him violently, and attempted to hurl him from a cliff. (And no, I'm not offering you suggestions should you find *my* message offensive this morning.)

Happily, today we find Jesus preaching to a more receptive crowd in the synagogue at Capernaum. He taught here quite often during his Galilean ministry. And we're told that the people were *astonished* at his teaching. In particular, they were astonished because his Word carried the weight of authority. This is something they weren't used to. The typical preacher in that day read a passage from the Scripture and then gave his hearers a complete run down on what a variety of celebrated rabbis from the past had said about it. So instead of getting a single, clear exposition of the Scripture that they could apply directly to themselves, the congregation got an array of supposedly learned opinions: some liberal, some conservative, some overly literal, some highly allegorical, others pure nonsense; with the result that when all was said and done, no one had any idea what the passage really meant to say. You could take it any way you wanted to. And what's interesting to me is that exactly the same thing happens in many churches today – especially those in which is prevalent the modern mindset that says there is no such thing as absolute truth. Instead, they say, there are only various shades of gray. In such churches the sacred Scriptures, when they actually bother to use them as the basis for teaching, are routinely manipulated, twisted, and robbed of their clear sense so that in the end, the preacher often explains that a passage means precisely the opposite of what it plainly does say.

That never happened when Jesus taught. There was nothing wishy-washy or watered down about his approach. Jesus proclaimed the truth of God clearly and emphatically. When he explained God's Holy Law, for example, his hearers knew that they were guilty. He didn't leave them any wiggle room, loopholes, or escape clauses. And of course, it was *this* that caused people to react so strongly to him, either negatively, “How dare you accuse me!” as the self-righteous sinner tries to defend himself and deny his guilt; or positively, “Ooh. You're right. I'm in sin and under God's wrath! I'm in trouble! How can I be saved?” Those who rejected the message of Jesus were in turn rejected by him. He left them and took his message elsewhere. But to those who responded positively, Jesus was then able to declare the grace and forgiveness of God just as clearly and emphatically as he had the Law, so that they might have no doubt about their salvation in him.

And highlighting this distinction, just in case we haven't got it yet, is this morning's episode that involves a man who has a demonic spirit living in him. And I think it speaks volumes that we find the guy sitting in the synagogue, of all places. You wouldn't normally think of someone who is demon possessed as being a regular churchgoer – and yet here he is. Apparently, up until this point, the unclean spirit and his host have been quite comfortable sitting together in the synagogue. And that makes sense. Where God's

Word is not taught clearly in its truth and purity, where it's not put forth with authority, where it's watered down and robbed of its power, demons and all manner of evil can thrive. They are perfectly safe in such places because there's nothing to challenge or confront them.

And it seems too that this man has come to terms with the evil that dwells within him. You think about some of the other cases of demon possession in the Scriptures, like the demonic of the Gerasenes, for example, who lived alone among the tombs, naked and wild, cutting himself with sharp rocks, howling like a wounded animal, and attacking passersby. Or think of the boy whose demon kept trying to throw him into water or fire to destroy him. These people were *tortured* by the unholy and unwelcome squatters within them. They hated the demonic presence in their lives. They were at war with each other.

But not this guy in the synagogue; he and his demon seem to get along all right. It's like they've come to a certain agreement: "You don't bother me, and I won't bother you." In other words, this man has made accommodations, set aside a place, for the evil spirit within him—which is a mistake, because over time evil will always demand and take over more and more space. That and it's very likely that an unclean spirit, once allowed a place, will invite some of his cohorts to join him. I mean, if you hang out the welcome sign for one demon, don't be surprised when it brings the whole family. In any case, it appears that this man and the evil spirit within him have lived for some time in this more or less comfortable state of symbiosis. Outwardly the man appears normal. He's an upstanding member of the synagogue. No one would ever suspect the powerful force of evil that is hidden within him.

That is, until he hears Jesus preach God's Word. That's what unsettles the unclean spirit. That's what disturbs its once comfy home and upsets the pact of peaceful (albeit parasitic) coexistence it has with its host. The authoritative teaching of Jesus causes the demon to panic so that it cries out in fear, "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!"

And there are several things to point out here. First, that the demonic spirit knows who Jesus is. That shouldn't surprise us. They've met before. No doubt the demon has vivid memories of being defeated, driven from heaven, and cast down to earth by the Son of God when the rebellion led by Satan failed. So, it's no wonder that it knows Jesus—and fears him – which is the second thing to take note of: the demon knows that it will ultimately be destroyed by Jesus. Not that it will cease to exist, mind you; but that its ongoing destruction in hell will endure forever. The spirit knows that day is coming – and anticipates it with dread. And we know from other encounters Jesus had with unclean spirits that the demons know that that day had not yet come during the time of Christ's earthly ministry. So, part of the demon's question, "What have you to do with us?" carries the sense of, "Why are you confronting me now? It's yet not time for the judgment. Why can't you leave me alone until then?"

But what I find most interesting about the unclean spirit's discourse is that with the exception of where it says to Jesus, "I know who you are", it consistently refers to itself in the plural. "What have you to do with us?" And "Have you come to destroy us?" At first glance one might think the demon is referring to itself and all the other unclean spirits out there in the world. But there are two reasons to believe otherwise. First, we're told the man had only one demonic spirit; and second, that all the other demons know who Jesus is too. So, to be consistent, if it had meant itself and the other demons, the spirit would have said, "We know who you are". In context, then, it's pretty clear that when the demon

speaks of *us*, it means *my host and me*. So intertwined are the two – and so accustomed is this man to having the unclean spirit within him– that the spirit wants him to believe that its destruction means his too. “You can’t live without me” is what the spirit is saying to the man. “We need each other. Remember, we get along just fine. We’re doing okay here. This Jesus is bad news for both of us. We both stand to lose big time.”

None of this is true, of course; but then a demon’s strongest weapon is deception. If it can get the man to believe that Jesus is a threat, if it can get the man to fear Jesus and his authority and to flee from his powerful Word, then its place is secure. It’ll be back to the status quo – for the time being anyway. And then when the end does come, both demon and man will indeed be destroyed forever in hell.

But Jesus is not here to destroy people. As we heard him say last week, he’s come to release the oppressed and set the captives free. And what all people must first be freed from are the lies and deceptions of the evil one. And that’s why Jesus first tells the unclean spirit to be quiet. When Christ speaks his truth, the lies of the devil are put to silence. And then Jesus commands the spirit to get out. And sure, the now mute spirit puts on a pathetic little show of force, tossing the man to the ground – just as elsewhere in the Gospels we see other demons crying out and sending their hosts into spasms as they depart – but in the end, as we’re told here, despite all their noise and flopping around, they are unable to do any real harm to their former hosts.

What follows is an account of the entire congregation’s amazement at the power and authority of Jesus’ Word. And they are justifiably impressed. But what we’re not told, however, is how the man who had been set free responded – though certainly he would have been included among those were amazed at the authority of Jesus’ Word. But put yourself in his sandals for a moment. When he gets up off the ground, stands on his feet, and brushes off the dust, he has a whole new perspective. The lies he’s lived with for so long: that the unclean spirit within him was not inherently dangerous, that it could be accommodated, that it meant him no harm, and that he couldn’t live without it – that’s all been proven wrong. And now he’s free of its evil influence and oppression – free to know Jesus not as a threat, but as the Savior – free to hear God’s Word with proper understanding – free to be filled, illumined, and guided by God’s own Holy Spirit – and free to live in faith in Jesus as a child of God. This man has been given a whole new life in Christ.

And at this point you may be thinking, “Well, that’s just great for him. It’s wonderful; but what does it have to do with me? I don’t have an unclean spirit living within me.” No? I beg to differ. I agree that you probably don’t have a demonic spirit living in you (though I confess to wondering about a few of you—just kidding). But the truth is that all of us do have a fallen, unclean, evil human nature within us. And an evil spirit is an evil spirit, whether human or demonic. They operate pretty much the same way. And they fear Jesus, because they know who he is and what he’s here to do; namely, he’s here to destroy them.

This is why so many people avoid Jesus and his Word of power, either by staying away from the church altogether, or by choosing for themselves churches where God’s Word is distorted, diluted, and explained away with sophistry. Either way, they don’t have to listen to Jesus or be threatened by his authoritative Word.

But you’re here this morning, in a church in which God’s Word is held in highest esteem – where it’s considered to be infallible and authoritative, the only rule and norm for

establishing doctrine and prescribing Christian life. And where too I as the preacher try to get out of the way and deliver Christ's powerful message to you without pulling any punches. And so, in a way, we are all (myself included) like the man in today's story. Outwardly we look like good, honest, faithful church-going people. And a part of us is. At the same time, we've all got that other spirit that belongs to our fallen sinful nature. And let's be honest: we've all come to certain terms with the sinful self inside. "Here's your area. Here are the sins I'll still allow myself to indulge in. You stay on your side, I'll stay on mine, and together we'll get along just fine." I'll bet you know exactly what I'm talking about. As individuals we might draw that line in different places; but it's there.

And what I'd have you see is that the reason it's there is that we are deceived. We imagine a certain amount of sin is excusable, or even desirable. Just think how boring life would be without it, we tell ourselves. And we mistakenly think that sin can be contained; that if allowed its own certain space, it won't work its way into other areas of our lives. It never happens that way; but we sure like to think so. And we believe the biggest lie of all: the sinful nature's claim that Jesus has come to destroy us, that he's a threat to us, that he means to ruin our lives completely, because, after all, "You need me", the sinful nature claims. "I'm the one who looks out for your best interest. I'm the one who makes sure you get your fair share, that you land on top, and that you get the credit you deserve. You can't live without me"; when all along the truth is that it's on account of the sin in our lives that we're dying.

So, what we need more than anything is the authoritative Word of Jesus that commands the fearful voice of our sinful nature to be silent and to get out. Jesus hasn't come to destroy us; he's come to save us from the sin within us by destroying just the sinful nature so that we can live free in him. He destroys sin by taking it upon himself – our guilt and shame – and carrying it to the cross where he received the damnation and destruction we deserved. And then, rising from the dead, he raises us up with him, like the man in the story, with a whole new perspective – with a whole new life, free of the deceit of sin, and filled with God's Spirit to enlighten and lead him.

With all this in mind, I'm asking you now to examine yourself. Where is that line I was talking about before – that agreement you've made with the sins in your life, the sins that have you convinced that that you need them, that you can't live without them, that they really don't hurt your relationship with God or with others, or that have you thinking that they're simply too difficult to get rid of. Your sinful nature is lying to you. It's only trying to protect its own turf to your temporal and maybe to your eternal disadvantage. It fears the power and authority of Jesus and tells you that he's a threat the whole you – that he's come to destroy you. It's not true. Jesus has come to set you free from sin and its delusion so that you can live as a child of God in time and eternity. So name the sins. You know what they are. Confess them. And let the authority of Jesus himself silence them and cast them out of your life as you hear these words: Almighty God in his mercy has given his Son to die for you and for his sake forgives you all your sins. As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***