

Pastor's Corner

February 26

It is hard to avoid noise. You hear it on the streets and in the corridors at school or at work. You sit in a waiting room where a television is blaring. You overhear a cell phone conversation that should be private. A passerby uses language you'd rather not hear. I like rock as much as anyone, but very loud rock music has been used as an instrument of torture in prison camps. Some noise is comforting; some of it is annoying; and some of it is frightening. What makes it noise is that we don't have much control over it.

Jesus confronted noise his first day on the job. Most people know that the first miracle Jesus worked was changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana. John's gospel explicitly says it was the first of his signs. But Mark wrote his gospel before John, and there Jesus begins work not at a wedding reception but in the synagogue of Capernaum. He teaches with such eloquence that he astonishes the people who hear him. Then a man with an unclean spirit approaches him, and Jesus works the first miracle recorded in Mark's gospel.

We don't know precisely what this unclean spirit is doing. Apparently it is causing the man to speak out inappropriately and to lose control of his actions. Nowadays we might try other explanations for this behavior, from Tourette syndrome to ADHD. Mark calls it an unclean spirit who makes noise but speaks very coherently about who Jesus is. The unclean spirit says, "Have you come to destroy us?" And then, "I know who you are – the Holy One of God." So, first day on the job, the people Jesus teaches do not fully know who he is, but the spirits do.

Jesus takes control of this uncontrollable situation. He addresses the spirit: "Quiet! Come out of him!" To Jesus, the main problem with this man was the noise he was making. The spirit came out with more noise. Jesus restored peace.

We don't assume that every noisy person is possessed by an unclean spirit. There may be other explanations. But – call them what you will – there are forces beyond our control and for which we need God's help. Identity thieves can destroy your credit rating. Making the wrong response to spam can cost you thousands of dollars. We worry if we'll get the same illness somebody else in the family has or that our neighbor got. We live under the constant threat of a terrorist attack. And there's a lot of noise; sometimes it is hard to find the silence that can restore peace to our souls.

Forces that are beyond our control are not beyond God's control, and that is the key message of this gospel passage. It comes at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry because

Mark wants us to know already the good news that comes at the end of his gospel. No force is beyond God's control, not unclean spirits, not death.

At the start of his ministry, Jesus demonstrated that he possessed power to make our lives better, and that he would use that power for those who are possessed by forces they cannot master. Sometimes when we are quiet with Jesus, we can feel him set us free.

"Pastor's Corner," DeKalb County Record-Herald 143/43 (Thursday, February 26, 2009):7.