

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Members of cathedral parish take pride in our beautiful worship of God and our exceptional outreach to the hungry. As with many cathedrals, occasionally someone who just doesn't look right walks in here. We welcome them, though we expect them to observe order and open their ears to God's word.

In the synagogue at Capernaum Jesus encountered a person who just didn't look right. Mark says the man in question had "an unclean spirit," but he doesn't explain more. Mark also said Jesus taught with authority, but he doesn't explain more. We'd love to know what he taught. Mark just explains what Jesus did and how the crowd reacted. Many of us who hear this story are amazed at the miracle, but the crowd was amazed at Jesus' "new teaching with authority."

This episode takes place in chapter 1 of Mark. Jesus is just beginning his public ministry. When he entered that synagogue to teach, he acted as though he did this every week. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus has several encounters with unclean spirits. The very first chapter immediately establishes this contest between good and evil. Eventually Jesus moves his ministry from synagogues into homes and the great outdoors, but at the beginning, he stays close to the places where the faithful gather. At least, they're all supposed to be faithful: one of them is unclean.

This one calls Jesus by name. You know how it feels when someone shouts at you by name, but you don't know who they are; they have some advantage over you. But Jesus has every advantage over this spirit, even though the spirit knows his name, where he's from, and a title rarely used in the New Testament but that rings true with us: He is the Holy One of God.

Some miracles involve an action: Jesus touches the person or has them do something. In this case he uses only his words: "Quiet! Come out of him!" That's it. His word alone heals. This method impressed the crowd. He taught them with his words, and he drove out an unclean spirit with his words.

A holy place like a synagogue or a cathedral is the last place you would expect to encounter an unclean spirit. You can probably name neighborhoods you avoid for fear of the people who hang around there and just don't look right. But a synagogue or a cathedral is also a place where the unclean may turn up.

In fact, on any given day, you and I, we may also be "unclean". We may look right to those around us, but we don't always look right to Christ. He knows what is in our heart, the words we have spoken, the actions we have taken, the way we have called on Christ by name and with a title of respect, but then claim we have sufficient power, we know what's right, what's best. Any one of us in this cathedral may not be too different from the man who took on Jesus in the synagogue that day. But we take heart: we are not different from the others either. They came to listen to Christ. They were impressed by his teaching, amazed at the power of his word.

That word of Christ also has power to drive what is unclean from us. It can purify our thoughts, cleanse our motives, and open our eyes—if only we would open our ears to let God's word inside. It may convulse us. It may cause a loud cry. But it has the power to heal you and me.

Sunday, January 31, 2021