



## Just As You Secretly Hoped...

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
Sunday, February 1, 2009*

*Mark 1:21-28:*

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

I had to go back to the dentist last week, to get the final part of my root canal work done. It all started over a year ago, while I was on sabbatical traipsing around India. Out of the blue one day, I was assaulted by a toothache. Some very strong, nameless drug purchased at a roadside pharmacy outside of Bangalore kept the pain at bay until I could return to the familiar safety of my dentist's office here in Center City. We thought I was all taken care of last January, but a few weeks ago, the pain came racing back. Root canal requires a couple of sessions – lots of Novocain, drilling, sterile rinse, cleaning it all out. It's no fun, but it sure is worth getting to the other side.

We just heard this story from Mark's Gospel. Jesus and his disciples went into the synagogue in Capernaum, where he began to teach. The people were astonished, because he taught with authority. He wasn't just saying some little prayers; he was preaching, he was teaching, slamming his fist; he meant it, and they knew it. And a man with unclean spirits in him recognized the authority and power Jesus had and called out, "what have you to do with us, Jesus?" And Jesus called out those evil spirits from that person – pulled them out, convulsing they came, with a loud voice, and Jesus sent them packing.

You know what I want to know? I want to know why someone with unclean spirits was in that synagogue in the first place. The Jewish people in those days obeyed unbelievably rigorous purity laws. Did that person think he could sneak through undetected, that he wouldn't be found out?

Or did he go to the synagogue because he knew that it was the one place where he might be able to get the help he needed? Filled with all those unclean spirits, he couldn't deal with it all by himself; he – or they – had been trying, and they'd been tormenting and tormented. They needed help. The help might not be pleasant, might involve some drilling, some convulsing, knock them out for a while. But it sure would be worth getting to the other side.

I am guessing that person with the unclean spirits didn't really know what all they had inside of them, and what was ailing them. I don't know what you tell yourself about why you come to church, or what it is you think you're seeking. I've heard people say they find it inspiring, grounding, or energizing; that it provides some peace, some refueling, or some re-prioritizing and reorienting for the week ahead. These and others are good reasons indeed. But I have found that for most of us, there's something deep within that needs healing. That "something" is different for each of us – those spirits within: loneliness, self-doubt, a grievance, anger, broken trust, depression, a scary diagnosis, or unfettered anxiety....

I think the person in the story, the one with the unclean spirits, was in the synagogue precisely because that was where the healing might be found.

It's pretty hard for us in this buttoned up society to speak plainly about our wounds, our needs, our fears. We don't do it; we try to keep it private; we don't want it to show – if we're struggling with debt, or a really screwed up relationship, or are beaten down, worn out and at the end of our rope. We don't talk easily about disease; we don't

talk about death; we don't talk about a lot of things – so a lot of those things just skulk around inside of us, festering. The fact that we don't talk about all this easily doesn't mean we don't want help or healing. We all want healing from something that hurts. And I believe we've come here to the synagogue on the off chance that Jesus might happen to be here too, that we'll just happen to catch him, with his disciples, doing some of that teaching – and some of that healing, with authority.

We are all welcome here, whatever shape we're in – outside or in. But to be very blunt about it, I hope to God, we won't be in the same shape when we leave. I hope we'll find some help, and some healing. Actually, I don't just hope for healing, I expect it, I believe it, I trust it – and I have known it for others and for myself. As surely as my dentist can drill into the canals of my teeth, Jesus can heal the wounds we have. I use the parallel advisedly. Because we want church to be nice, to be friendly, to be loving – and I am all in favor of these things. But for heavens' sake, if we're going to get at the root of what really ails us, we may have to set aside pretty and nice; we may have to go for honest, vulnerable, and effective.

Let me say more about my expectation that we don't leave in the same shape in which we arrive. I am not talking about just what happens inside here – within the temple walls, nor about what happens on a single given visit. I don't wish to preclude the possibility of healing happening powerfully for any one of us on any given day – perhaps even here, today, now – and God knows some of us want it – desperately – here, today, now. In my experience, the healing that comes from Jesus comes over some time and comes as we travel the Way of Christ in our lives – praying, asking for help, caring for others, seeking to be compassionate and just. In my experience, it doesn't actually feel like going to the dentist at all, because Jesus doesn't use drills. For that matter, Jesus doesn't use Novocain either. Jesus uses two things, even more powerful and effective: truth and love, truth and love – with authority.

Out of the many possible stories of healing to be told, stories which may have meant healing for some of you, the story I feel most at liberty to speak of is my own. If you were here last Sunday when we were remembering the conversion of St. Paul, you heard me tell of a couple of instances that were part of my own conversion, my own entry into the synagogue, my own first steps on this Way of Christ's path. I spoke of being far away, in Kyoto, practicing Zen, then praying with the Bible, and hearing God say, "I wondered when you were going to show up." And I spoke about shortly thereafter, waffling over whether or not I was called to ordained ministry, and a priest friend finally asking, with exasperation, "What do you want, man, doves?!" Yes, I wanted doves – even a single dove, would suffice.

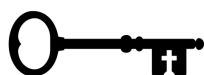
Those are stories from long ago now; this spring I will have been a priest for 20 years. But the healing isn't about my bringing a priest; the healing is about my being a person, who is broken and who struggles. If I had to name the unclean spirit that once had a hold on me, I'd probably have to resort – as the scripture does – to speaking in the plural. For there was one voice that said, "I doubt you're worth much," while another said, "do you really think God loves you? Really?" Which translated into, "let's see if you can really act with any boldness; where's your confidence and your courage?" Those voices suffocated and suppressed any possible hearing of the voice spoken by God to Jesus and to each one of us: the voice that proclaims, you are my beloved. You are my beloved.

If God didn't use a drill, and didn't do it all at once, how did the healing happen? Over time, over many steps taken, right steps and mis-steps, responding:

- As Christ whispers within inviting me to be quiet, to pray, read holy Scripture; to listen and to watch.
- As Christ greets us and rejoices with us in worship, singing hymns, and sharing sacraments.
- As Christ prompts me to be generous, to share what I have been given – really to give more than I feel is safe; to give so that I feel challenged – my money, my energy, my love.
- As Christ invites us to spend time with those who are "other" – to serve them and, in so doing, discover ourselves served by them.
- As Christ meets us in our struggle with complicated issues and moral crises – about what I should do or not do, according to our faith?
- As Christ prompts me to apologize when I make mistakes and hurt somebody, to forgive when somebody else makes mistakes and hurts me.

As I list them off they sound predictable, almost generic, just what you'd expect the priest to say. But these things comprise the very heart and substance of the journey, the life with Christ. Jesus works among us through these things, in these ways, teaching us, healing us, sometimes with compassion and balm, sometimes with fire and challenge – always in love and truth – with authority. It began when I entered the temple, set forth on the Way. It began when a small voice within squeaked; it did not shout, but it squeaked: "What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth? What do you want of me, from me, for me? Do you see me? Do you love me? Will you heal me?"

Today, those voices that crippled before no longer have possession over me. I am not finished, mind you; far from it. But I know today in a way I could not possibly have declared in the past that God loves me - and just as surely, that God loves you. I am glad you've made it to the temple and are taking steps in the Way of Christ, because just as you secretly hoped, Jesus is here too, with healing... for you.



Open hearts. Open minds.