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Psalms 111

Mark 1:21-28

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BEYOND WORDS

My father grew up on a small ranch in west Texas where the semi-arid land made it difficult to raise the cattle they did. In that part of the world, they use different verbal descriptions than they do here. For instance, folks who were all talk and no action would be described as being “all hat and no cattle.” You get the imagery – someone who would wear a fancy Stetson cowboy hat, pretending to be a real cowhand while never actually getting up into the saddle or picking up a lasso. When it comes to religious rather than ranch terminology, a similar idea would be termed “not practicing what you preach.”

The Gospel of Mark presents Jesus as one who certainly practices what he preaches and teaches. In this initial chapter of the account, just after he was baptized and then calls some disciples to follow him, the first story presenting Jesus’ public ministry focuses on him going to a synagogue on the Sabbath. You might think that is not a very compelling start of a gospel account. But it ends up being not just another Shabbat. Jesus begins to teach in the synagogue in a way that is described as having authority. Such authority implies that the teaching connects powerfully with the others there. However, the power of that authority gets tested when there is a significant disturbance that invades the religious gathering. A man with an unclean spirit shows up and begins crying 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.”

It’s quite an interruption to a worship service. And it’s quite an abrupt beginning of Mark’s description of a ministry of God’s good news through a confrontation between a man with an unclean spirit and a person upon whom God’s Spirit descended when he had been baptized. Jesus shows that he is more than just talk when he responds to the unclean spirit within the man and calls it to come out of him. Our Lord would later face criticism for doing the work of healing on the Sabbath, which was to be a day of rest. However, here was an opportunity to not

only teach through words, but through his actions. What his action indicates is that God has the compassion and the power to intervene when humans are being dominated by forces that have a negative impact on our lives. The 111th Psalm, which we heard earlier, is an expression of praise that God's deeds show both divine compassion and power to affect our lives. In Jesus' encounter, since the spirit is unwilling to be made clean through changing its ways, our Lord casts it out of the man.

An unclean spirit - I'm not sure how to describe this spirit scientifically, but theologically, we can say that it had spiritual knowledge, even beyond what others in the synagogue had, recognizing that God intended to use Jesus in a special way. Mark could have described it as an 'evil' spirit or as a 'demonic' spirit, but the word 'unclean' is used instead. Ritual purity was an important practice for many Jews then and since. There were to be certain practices of ritual washing if folks had been exposed to someone who was ill or if they had been around particular kinds of animals or a corpse or even certain people outside the religious community. The people were expected to literally and figuratively 'clean up' for worship. The synagogue was thought of as a sacred place, so an effort to get 'cleaned up' for worship in the best sense showed respect for the holy God who would be the focus of worship.

But this spirit is termed 'unclean' because even though it expresses words of truth, there are no matching actions that accompany its words. The unclean spirit proclaims that Jesus is the Holy One of God, but there is no behavioral application that flows from that faith statement. There is no demonstrated willingness to change course in order to follow that holy one. Bold statements should lead to bold actions, but the latter is missing here. The spirit is also deemed unclean because it seeks to have total authority over someone else's life in a dominating way that is counter to God's will. Such a spirit values its own desires for power over the needs of the other. Such a way of living calls for going beyond even true words of affirmation.

There are religious communities where their religion isn't authoritative because their religious practice never goes beyond their words. There may be all kinds of bold talk, bold professions, but it is the kind of weak faith that doesn't change their

lives, and we have the human capacity to sort of like it that way. Before the pandemic, when you could come to corporate worship in person, many of you would get physically cleaned up and put on clean clothes in preparation for coming to church. But there is more to getting cleaned up before God than that. A faith community can have an intrusion of uncleanness when it acknowledges who Jesus is, but is not open to taking dynamic action based on that belief; when it views the liberating work of Jesus as a disruption rather than as the primary purpose of the One to whom we submit ourselves in worship.

I'm not saying that it is easy to be totally consistent in having all of our actions match our affirmations. It can be fairly simple to say the words that we believe we ought to love our neighbors. It is harder to actually do that, particularly when some of our neighbors frankly aren't that loveable, and when it requires us to make some changes in order to live out that love. But such a challenge can turn into an opportunity for us to realize that perhaps a less than clean spirit inhabits us, a spirit that may have some detrimental power over our actions. And yet, the good news that Jesus Christ delivers in word and deed gives us hope that we don't have to be permanently stuck in such a bad situation. Rather, here is an opportunity for us to recognize that the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism is the Holy Spirit that was poured out upon us in our baptism. In reliance upon that Spirit, we can begin to reflect God's compassion and power through actions that accompany our words.

Different expressions of the church have lost an authoritative witness because its actions did not match the words it said it believed. Jesus Christ calls us and enables us to follow him in going beyond words, to demonstrate God's good news that can make a dynamic impact upon lives within or beyond a place of worship. One of the most joyous of learning experiences for children is when they get to participate in an educational exercise called 'Show and tell.' Each child gets to show something that is a demonstration of a story. Jesus came, not just telling about God's good news, but also showing it. We as his followers, by the power of his Spirit, can clean up our act through doing the same. Thanks be to God. Amen.