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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
January 27, 2018

What has he to do with us?

Mark 1: 21-28

Thaddeus Truly Pardue is a different kind of teacher. Fascinated by a wide range of topics, Pardue is the only teacher I've ever had who would not, could not be contained by the subject he was hired to teach. I think he was supposed to teach us American History, but his love of art, reading, writing, and proper grammar meant that he attempted to impart comprehensive knowledge of culture, politics, literature along with each time period he took on – which means I don't think we got much past World War II. I vividly remember taking vocabulary pronunciation tests into a tape recorder in the back of the classroom, to prove that I could properly say the fifty most commonly mispronounced words. And banal though that exercise was, we loved Pardue. We loved his class, which he team-taught with a disorganized but equally brilliant English teacher named Cathy Sledge, who once spilled coffee on a class's Frankenstein tests and put them in the oven to dry off, which caught them on fire, so she gave everyone an "A."

Pardue's passion for teaching and learning were infectious. His tests were impossible – 100 fill-in-the-blank and short answer questions that may or may not have been covered in class or in the reading. He not only taught us the roots of the American Revolution, but gave us a love of Charles Willson Peale and John Singer Sargent, taking us to museums and quizzing us as we walked, awestruck, through the galleries.

With a bushy white beard and rosy cheeks, Pardue is a cross between Santa Claus and Hemingway. His teaching was different, his knowledge so encyclopedic, passion so evident – he lectured without notes! He taught with authority, and when he spoke, we listened.

Have you had a teacher like that? Someone who sparked your interest, and made you into a better student because they made you hungry to learn? The right teacher can change your life.

From our passage this morning, Jesus was that kind of teacher. The people in the temple that day are amazed when they hear him. He doesn't drone on and on, like the scribes must have done, reciting dates and passages. He teaches with authority. He changes lives.

The gospel of Mark is the earliest gospel in the New Testament, written around the year 66 CE. And the author uses several different sources to create his story of the life of Jesus. He has a strategy in which he inserts a small story into a bigger story and the two stories interpret each other. It's called intercalation. Some interpreters call it a Markan sandwich. Our passage this morning is just such a sandwich, where a story about Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum is interrupted by a story about an exorcism: a

man with an unclean spirit literally interrupts Jesus, names him the Holy One of God, and Jesus heals the man by exorcizing the spirit.

What's going on here?

What can an exorcism show us about Jesus's teaching? Jesus has just come back from 40 days in the wilderness, where the Spirit sustained him while he was tempted by Satan. Back to civilization, Jesus calls his first disciples and shows up in Capernaum to teach. And who shows up here, too, but an evil spirit to challenge him. We have Jesus, possessed by the holy Spirit. Confronted by a man, possessed by an evil spirit. And Jesus wins. This isn't just a story about an exorcism. It's about challenging the boundaries religious folk put up between who's blessed and who isn't. Whose worthy and who isn't. Whose life matters and whose doesn't. By healing a guy labeled "unclean" – Jesus confronts the religious leaders who called the man that in the first place. By making an unclean man clean, Jesus tears down walls the scribes had erected between who's in and who's out. In putting these stories together, Mark lets Jesus *show what he's teaching* – that demonic forces better watch out, because the Holy one of God is here to reconcile and make new. Jesus starts his ministry by defying the demonic and breaking boundaries – by making the unclean clean in the middle of the worshipping community that had excluded him.

Sure, I can hear you thinking. But what's that got to do with us?

Our scientific mindset makes it really hard to hear this story without a healthy dose of skepticism. We know people long ago tried to make sense of mental or physical illness by blaming evil spirits, and we know better than that now. And yet – we need this story to be true. We need the healing Christ offers. Raise your hand if a close friend or colleague has had the flu or some other major drippy, coughy, sneezy, achey illness in the past few weeks. Raise your hand if YOU'VE had the flu, or you think you're coming down with something? We're in the middle of the worst flu epidemic our country has seen in years, we could use some healing. We know what it is to be sick, and sometimes it *does* feel like we've been afflicted by an evil spirit.

If not we ourselves, we've all known someone who struggles with mental illness. Who has worn the black shroud of depression, or is fighting the demon of addiction, or who carries the stigma of a thousand other diagnoses around in their pocket along with their wallet and keys. Except we know enough brain science to understand that the only evil around mental illness is so often the community's response to it. No funding for mental health programs, so our prisons and shelters have to pick up the slack.

The idea of an exorcism may offend our modern sensibilities, but evil is real. More than 650,000 Rohingya Muslims seeking refuge in Bangladesh are slated to be repatriated to Myanmar in the weeks ahead, even though they face apartheid conditions at best, genocide at worst should they return. On Tuesday morning, two high school freshmen were killed by a classmate before first period. And 160 young women athletes were assaulted by one very sick man –evil exists. It persists. It doesn't matter which newspaper

you read or which channel you watch or the settings on your newsfeed – the brokenness of our world is palpable and pervasive. And we need the power of God to enable us to stand against it, to overcome it.

The good news is that Christ stands fearlessly in opposition to evil, opposing all forces that threaten to keep us from fullness of life. This story shows us that when the power of God is let loose in the world, it makes the unclean clean and brings the outsider in and sends evil packing. So all the divisions we put up to separate ourselves from one another, to keep some in and others out are overcome by Christ. Black and white, housed and homeless, healthy and mentally ill, poor and wealthy, citizen and undocumented – those binaries and boxes we try to put each other into are taken away in God's kingdom. We are made one in Christ.

Mr. Pardue taught me the value of experiential education. From him, I learned that history lives and breathes when learned alongside the culture that gave rise to political and social movements. We danced the Charleston as we learned about the gilded age, and listened to 1776 to get a better grasp of the American revolution. It wasn't enough to read and learn the meaning of vocabulary words, we had to actually be able to speak them.

When we experience something, we understand it differently. It becomes embodied. That's the value of an internship, a residency, field education. Seeing something done sparks our imagination, makes us realize we, too, can do it.

So when Christ stands in the assembly and casts out the demon, making the unclean man clean again – those gathered there see that he came to liberate us from all that holds us captive. To heal the sick. To set the oppressed free. By the power of God, Jesus makes a broken man whole again. By God's authority, he teaches grace and reconciliation by enacting it.

What does that mean for us? I believe it means we're called to treat this church like a classroom, like a place for field education – a place where we experience enough of the liberation and healing promised by the kingdom to know that it's possible. A place where our imagination is sparked, so we realize that we, too, can be part of what sends evil packing and enacts grace and reconciliation.

Brenda Toomey spoke to us last week about hospitality. When I was new to our church, Brenda told me a story that showed me what hospitality looks like here. She told me about a woman who came to worship here years ago, who was convinced of the presence of demons in the world. She came into the narthex and was very upset, muttering how there were demons, demons everywhere and they made such a mess of things. Following worship she remained very upset, so Brenda found a roll of paper towels, and let the woman show her all the places where she thought the demons had made a mess of things, and together they cleaned it up. I don't know if that woman has been back to our church. But I do know that for a little while, someone was present to her, and tried to create a space where she was welcome.

What's more, I know that we, as individuals and through our church partners, are speaking up, to build a city where people have access to health care, supportive affordable housing, and so much more. A different world, the kingdom of God is here, if we work together by the power of God to build it. May it be so.