

With Authority

Mark 1:21-28

This week Michelle and I went to a mass at a Catholic church in Oconomowoc because Emma was performing at the mass with the Waukesha Children's Choir. It was a big deal. The place is huge, and it was packed with people.

Part of the reason was because Archbishop Listeki was there. A lot of people wanted to see him. But I'll tell you, if anyone ever complains about me speaking for too long or our services going over a little bit sometimes, just sit through one of those masses. They said the Hail Mary 50 times. Literally.

There were a couple of things that struck me as I attended. First, if you talk to church growth people about why younger people don't come to church, they'll tell you that one of the biggest problems is that a church service is too boring.

They don't like the music. They don't like preaching unless it's really engaging. They don't care for ornate sanctuaries or stained glass windows. Well, I officially stopped believing that nonsense as of Monday night.

The sanctuary is very new, very bright, and very ornate. Very traditional. And they said the liturgy just as it has been said for the past 50 years. They did things that have been done in the church for almost 2000 years. And there were plenty of younger people there who participated just like everyone else, even though it was certainly not entertaining to them.

So I don't buy the line that people don't attend because church isn't entertaining enough. It seems that people went because they believe that God expects them to attend. Part of the liturgy includes asking God to save them from the fires of hell.

So if you don't show up, don't confess, don't take communion, in that tradition, you're literally taking your eternal destiny into your hands. And believe me, they're not the only ones who have convinced their parishioners that they're risking eternal damnation by not showing up for church.

There are plenty of Lutheran churches and evangelical churches around here who make it clear that God will punish no-shows. Down south most churches are like that. I don't see things in those terms. So if I can't threaten people for not coming to church, I'm kind of reduced to begging people to come to church. I wonder if I have something to learn from these other folks.

Anyway, the other thing I noticed was that there is this tremendous division between that which is holy and that which is not. The priests are completely separate from everyone else in terms of holiness.

People look at the priests very differently from the way we look at pastors in the ABC. I'm not being critical of it. I'm just noticing how different it is. Whereas you and I sip a little cup of grape juice and chew a little piece of bread, they believe they are handling the very body and blood of Jesus.

They have holy water which they use to cleanse the congregation. We just have a bubbler downstairs for people who are thirsty. Everyone who enters the pew must genuflect before entering. Every pew has kneeling pads so people can kneel as they go through the liturgy. I'm just thrilled if I can get people to enter the pews at all.

I could go on and on. But my point is that these practices reflect a religious viewpoint which sees the world in terms of holy vs. unholy. And the church is the keeper of the holy. Their job is to maintain holiness in their building, in the lives of their families, and to keep all unholiness out.

It's a viewpoint which conceives of the world in terms of a battle between good and evil, one in which evil has the upper hand and has free reign to deceive people who are outside of the church into believing and supporting all kinds of evil things.

Again, this viewpoint is by no means limited to the Catholic church. Most evangelical Christians see things the same way. The church is a fortress established by God to stand against the evil in the world. It is the place in the world where God actually reigns, whereas evil reigns everywhere else.

Their hope, their expectation, is that Jesus will eventually come and take the whole place back. Meanwhile, their job is to try and purify the world, and to keep the church as pure as possible while they wait. They can't defeat evil in the world, but they can keep it from infiltrating their ranks by sticking to their beliefs and practices.

Part of the reason why this approach is so ingrained is because our faith is rooted in Judaism, which was also centered around maintaining very clear boundaries between that which is holy and that which is unclean.

In the laws God gave to Moses, the Israelites are commanded to keep themselves pure from everything unholy. So you couldn't marry anyone outside of your race. You couldn't eat pork or shellfish. You couldn't touch blood or a dead body.

If you came down with a disease or were possessed by a demon, you had to be isolated from the community so that you didn't make someone else impure. You had to be cleansed, you had to wait a certain period of time, and then you had to make an offering to God. Only then could you be part of the community again.

So when Jesus begins his ministry in Mark, he starts working with a community of people whose religious leaders felt that God had insisted on everyone staying pure. You couldn't allow impure people to mill around. You had to move them out of town until they could be cleansed or healed.

But what many of us fail to realize is that Jesus' understanding of his mission is completely different from what people thought God was going to do. Instead of insisting that people be pure, instead of teaching people that they have to stay in their own purified place in the world, he taught that God was, in fact, in charge over the entire world.

The object of the game wasn't to keep themselves pure by keeping all the bad people out. The object of the game was to show that God was willing to meet people wherever they were at, regardless of how pure or impure they were.

Today's story is a perfect example. Jesus was a teacher, he was an expert in God's law. And one Saturday he was invited to teach at a local synagogue in a seaside town called Capernaum. He had just called four followers who were out fishing by the lake. And he was about to show them how God was going to assert God's power over the world.

Jesus begins teaching about whatever Old Testament passage was on the schedule for the day. The difference between the way Jesus taught and the way other expert in the law taught was this: Most people would say, "God's law says we should do this. It says we should stay away from that."

Jesus, on the other hand, came off as a little more presumptuous. He says, "I know the law says this, but I'm telling you to do it this other way." He talked as if he had God's authority to interpret the law, to tell people to follow it differently. In some cases he tells people that they don't have to follow certain parts of it.

This way of teaching caused serious problems for people who thought that God wanted them to follow all of the laws. Naturally they wondered, "Who does this guy think he is to tell us not to follow these laws? He's not God. He doesn't have the authority to change the law."

But Mark wants to make the case that Jesus does, in fact have the authority to change the way people understand the law. Mark wants to show us that Jesus is the son of God.

And since he is the Son of God, he can speak on God's authority and say things like, "You don't have to worry about keeping yourself "pure" anymore." Purity doesn't come from avoiding certain foods or keeping yourselves isolated from people of different races. Purity is expressed in the way you act. In kindness, in tolerance, in grace."

This all sounds pretty radical. Completely different from what they've heard before. So how does Mark show that Jesus has God's authority teach this way? Why should people take Jesus seriously?

While he's teaching, and while people are grumbling under their breath about some of Jesus' grandiose claims, he's interrupted by a man who begins shouting. This man asks Jesus if he's there to destroy them. He says he knows that Jesus is the Holy One from God.

This guy isn't just a disgruntled parishioner who doesn't agree with Jesus. Mark tells us that this man is possessed by a demon. That in itself is bad enough. But think of what this means in terms of purity.

Here they are on the Sabbath, in a synagogue, all kinds of people are gathered there. And this guy is milling around with a demon. He's making the whole place and everyone in it impure by just being there.

And even if you set that whole disaster aside, they had been taught that such a person could not access God until he was made pure again. People who were considered demon possessed had to be removed from society. They had to be cleansed by a local folk healer. Then they had to wait and offer an offering before God would have anything to do with them.

So even if he is in the synagogue, no one thought God would have anything to do with him. This is a perfect opportunity for Jesus to make his point about God's kingdom.

Jesus tells the demon inside the man to be silent and to come out. The guy then has what appears to be an epileptic seizure. He started screaming and shaking, kind of like what I did when the Brewers beat the Diamondbacks in the playoffs last fall.

Then, all of a sudden, the guy was totally still. The demon was gone. Now this turn of events raised all sorts of questions. If God didn't have anything to do with impure people, why would Jesus use God's power to cleanse this man?

And if Jesus has God's authority to cast out a demon, then doesn't that mean he has the authority to completely reinterpret the law? Doesn't that mean he has the authority to say, "You know, God has chosen to do something completely different in the world today. Let me show you what God wants to do for the world now."

Mark's point is that Jesus came to bring an end to the idea that God only rules over this small "kingdom" people have created and consider to be pure of evil. Their "pure" community was in fact not pure. Try as they might, they couldn't keep the evil out.

But Mark also wants to show that God does indeed have power over the entire world, including places that the church considers hopelessly overrun with evil. There is nowhere on the planet where God's power is unable to conquer evil.

Jesus teaches people that things are the opposite of what they thought. People who pride themselves on having kept themselves pure of the evil of the world have often isolated others from God's grace in the process. And, if the truth be told, they haven't actually kept themselves as pure as they'd like to think they had.

On the other hand, those who consider themselves hopeless impure and completely unable to access God's power find that God, in fact, meets them where they're at and heals them of their disease.

God reigns in their lives even when they eat the wrong foods or contract certain diseases or find themselves in places where people thought God was not in charge. This man was, in fact, pure all along. The demon inside him was unclean.

In other words, it's not what we put into our bodies that makes us unclean. It's the bad things we do that make us unclean, the hurtful words, the selfish actions, the violent reactions, the desperate things we do out of fear. That's what gets between us and God.

It's not our weaknesses, our illness, our family situation, our work. It's not the job we've done as parents. It's not our purported lack of success in life. It's what we do when someone walks through that door who is hurting and needs comfort.

It's what we do when someone is sick in our congregation. It's what we do when we have the unparalleled privilege of being able to teach our children about our faith. It's what we do when we realize what a serious problem we have with poverty and homelessness.

It's what we do when someone comes from another country and needs a safe place to worship in this new, strange place. It's what we do when someone loses a loved one, when someone is being treated for cancer, when someone has a miscarriage, when someone is going through a divorce. That's what makes you pure or impure.

I remember being a youth pastor in a very small town during seminary. The congregation I served really considered themselves this bastion of godly purity in a world mostly overrun by Satan.

So when I suggested that we take the youth group to Great America, they didn't think that was really edifying for their young people. When I suggested that we do some kind of alternative to Halloween, they also reacted negatively.

I remember one woman who had kids in the youth group tell me, “Halloween is Satan’s high holy day. We don’t even want to be outside on that day. We just lock the doors and stay inside until it’s all over.”

As you might imagine, I couldn’t stay there and do ministry for very long. I didn’t see my faith in those terms. My faith was not about withdrawing from the world and keeping myself pure from it.

My faith taught me that I should be present in society, that God’s power went with me wherever I went, that the people who considered themselves completely helpless and utterly estranged from God were the ones God was most eager to reach through me.

I also knew that, being a human being like everyone else, I was not pure, nor was she or her family. And no matter how hard we tried, no matter what steps we took to make ourselves righteous, we could never make ourselves pure.

Purity, holiness, comes from doing exactly what Jesus does in Mark, helping the sick, visiting those who are hurting, and extending God’s love and healing to those who think God wants nothing to do with them.

You and I are going to meet all kinds of people like that this week, in all likelihood. How will we respond? Will it be beneath us to help them? Will we be worried about having our reputations stained? Will we be surprised and disappointed to know that such people exist in the pristine world we’ve tried to create for ourselves?

Or will we do as Jesus does? Will we be glad to be present with them? Will we avoid the temptation to make ourselves feel better by pointing out just how much better we’ve done for ourselves than they have? Will we reach out and touch them, the way Jesus did, regardless of the consequences?

Will we be confident that God has given us the authority to be God’s representative? Will we be certain that God has given us power over any and all evil in the world? Will we be **more** concerned about people seeing how pure we are, or **more** concerned with people seeing the power of God in the world?

Jesus later gives his disciples the authority to do the same things he did. We believe that God gives us the same authority as followers of Jesus. What will you do with it? Who will you help?

Who do you know that feels completely hopeless in terms of God’s love and healing? That’s the person you want to reach out to this week. The one who feels like a demoniac in a synagogue. Reach out to that person, and everyone will experience God’s kingdom.