

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his disciples 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.

Being a Disciple

I'd like to talk today about discipleship. Last week we heard about Jesus calling the first disciples and this week we hear about their first outing together. We are told that they went to Capernaum and on the Sabbath Jesus went into the synagogue to teach. In this account from Mark's Gospel we don't hear what Jesus teaches, but we hear that the people who heard his teaching were astounded, because Jesus taught with great authority. And then we hear how Jesus silenced an unclean spirit, and cast the demon out of the man. This is big stuff and I can't help wondering what the first disciples thought about all this.

We hear that the onlookers were amazed. And someone said "What is this, a new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." What must Simon and Andrew have thought? Were James and John excited or terrified by what they had seen. They must have been wondering what they had gotten themselves into by following this amazing and astounding person.

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands or anything, but do you think of yourself as a disciple? If someone had asked me that question 8 or 10 years ago I would probably have said no. Sure I was pretty active in my church and I tried to do the right thing, be a good person, but I thought discipleship was only for those really holy people, you know who I mean, people like Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Henry Nouwen. My idea of discipleship was reserved for those devoutly religious people that had a lot more on the ball than I did.

Well... I'm here to tell you that discipleship is not reserved only for those extraordinary holy people. Have you noticed in Mark's Gospel especially, that he doesn't paint a very flattering picture of the disciples? I find that a comfort. The first disciples have a lot of trouble understanding Jesus. Jesus has to explain things over, and over again. They are portrayed as rather dense and even petty at times. Simon Peter – the Rock on which the church will be built – denies Jesus three times. Judas, the one entrusted with the community's money, betrays Jesus to the High Priest. Discipleship is not for perfect people, it is for all of us common imperfect people who are willing to try.

I think the Gospel passage today gives us a good idea of what discipleship really means. When we become active followers of Jesus we will be constantly astounded at Jesus' teaching and his authority. He teaches us to love our enemies – a radical teaching. He teaches us to feed the hungry and care for the sick and lonely and when we do, we are serving Christ. We are being true disciples.

When we become disciples we will witness miraculous events like the casting out of a demon. What do you think of these demon stories? I have trouble wrapping my imagination around them. I can't get past memories I still have from the movie "The Exorcist". I tend to think of demons today in light of science and medical advancement. I tend to think of demons in terms of mental illnesses and addictions.

I worked at Bridgeport Hospital as a Chaplain Intern and one of my assignments was in a psychiatric unit. I ministered to many people who suffer from modern day demons. One person I met there left a lasting impression on me, I'll call her Mary.

Mary was about 40 years old and she told me that she had come to the hospital because she had tried to commit suicide. She had been hospitalized several times before, but this time she had gone into a severe depression because of the deaths of her Mother, Father, and a close friend all within a 12 month period.

Mary told me that she had been diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder when she was around 20. Bipolar Disorder is sometimes referred to as Manic Depression and it is an illness that causes a chemical imbalance in the brain. Mary said that by the time she was diagnosed she already had a serious drug and alcohol problem. For 20 years she had been battling her demons and, to me, she didn't look like she was going to make it. She said she always sought help when things got bad, but the people she had always relied on to take care of her when she got sick, were her parents. So this was very serious, she was terribly depressed and she felt she had no one to lean on, no one to care for her.

One of the things I've learned about pastoral care is that the best thing you could do for a person who is in a crisis is to help them talk about how they are feeling. Not offer advice or try to cheer them up, just listen, ask questions, and be present. Showing up is 90% of the job in pastoral care. We talked for about 40 minutes about how hopeless life seemed and how unfair it was that her parents were gone. We talked about how much she missed them and needed them.

As I was preparing to leave I asked her if she'd like to pray and she said she would. I asked her what she's like to pray for and she gave me this funny look like, are you kidding, what do you think... but I waited for her to answer and she said, I want to pray for an end to my pain. And that is what we prayed for. "Almighty God, Mary has been in a lot of pain, she has lost her parents, she has lost her friend. She is depressed and struggling to find something to hold on to. Please make your presence known to her. Please ease her pain."

God did ease her pain. Two days later I saw Mary again and she was a different person. She told me that the Doctors had gotten her medications straightened out and that she was feeling a lot better. She told me that it was such a relief to talk to someone about her grief. I told her I was so glad to hear she was doing better and that I thought she was one of the bravest people I had ever met.

As I think about Mary's story, I feel like what happened to Mary was a lot like what had happened to that man in the synagogue in Capernaum. It was like the casting out of an unclean spirit. And I wonder if the feeling I had of amazement and joy was like what Simon and Andrew must have felt.

As disciples we will be astounded at Christ's teaching and authority, and we will be amazed at Christ's power to heal. This is what discipleship means. It will be exciting and frightening, challenging and rewarding. But this is what Jesus calls us to do. And if we are willing to try we can do it just as the first disciples did. Not as perfect people with a perfect record of accomplishment, but simply as who we are - fishermen and tax collectors, business people and home makers. AMEN!