

Sermon Epiphany 4B 31 January 2021
Mark 1:21-28
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. Let's pray:

Do you remember the first time you ever felt alienated from yourself? Maybe you did something completely out of character, or felt like you were a stranger in your own skin. Do you remember what that was like?

Sadly, I can recount too many incidents when I have acted far less appropriately than the way my parents raised me, and contrary to what I knew was right. Some I have shared with you before. Many I hope never revisit the light of day - I don't want to embarrass my parents.

I can also very easily get carried away by my work, with the unintended consequence of marginalising my family. That's not the kind of husband and father I want to be.

Stories like these and a thousand others, are ways in which I have been the man with an unclean spirit. I'm that bloke in today's gospel. I don't want to draw attention to myself; I simply offer it as an invitation to look at your own life and the ways in which you too might be a person with an unclean spirit. If I'm unwilling to examine my life, who I've become, and what I've done, I have no credibility to stand here and ask you to do that in your life. If I'm not willing to share with you my struggles to live the gospel of Christ and let it point to the truth about who I am, I have no basis on which to preach to you. I tell you my stories hoping they might help and encourage you to examine yourself.

Look back over your life. When have you felt like a stranger to yourself?

We all live as people with unclean spirits. There're times when we betray our integrity, when we're confused and lost about who we are or who we want to be, when we look at our life and don't recognise ourselves or like what we see. Or maybe we want our life to be different. We want to stop causing

difficulty for ourselves. We want to be more than what we've become. That's what it's like to live with an unclean spirit.

By unclean spirit I mean that we're helpless sinners. We curve inward on ourselves, away from God who loves us. We become confused and lost. It happens so easily. It sneaks up on us. It happens to us as individuals, and collectively. That's what the craziness in our world today is about. Living apart from God. Countries, governments, churches, businesses, organisations and groups are estranged, have lost their way, and want to know the way home. It's all described in today's gospel.

There's a man with an unclean spirit "in their synagogue." He's not unique among them or us. He speaks not just for himself but also as one of them. "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us*" (emphasis added)? The people in the synagogue don't tell him to pipe down, sit down, or get out. They seem pretty happy to let him speak for them because he's one of them. That's the nature of sin.

He's become so familiar and accepted in their lives and community and so much a part of who they are that they neither react to nor are affected by him. He's not the strange thing about that day. So, who is the strange one in the synagogue? Jesus. Jesus is the one that astounds them and seems so different from what they've seen or heard before.

They're so lost to themselves that the good news of Jesus becomes strange and unusual. "What is this?" they ask, "A new teaching – with authority!" Doesn't that happen to us too? We become so lost, so alienated, so estranged, that the good news – forgiveness, mercy, grace, sounds a bit crazy to us.

"You want me to love my enemies? I can't do that. I should forgive how many times, Jesus? Isn't seven times enough? Those who live by the sword will die by the sword? Jesus, don't you understand that peace is gained by superior firepower? I've never killed anyone but now you're telling me I shouldn't even get angry? And it's not enough that I've not had an affair? I shouldn't even look and enjoy some thoughts? The kingdom is within? No, that's not how it works here. What about my successes and reputation, proving myself, and all those things I've worked so hard for?"

The more I look at my life and world, the stranger the good news sounds. That's more a statement about having an unclean spirit than it is about the gospel of Christ. It's a symptom of sin.

The great tragedy of sin, is that the most familiar and craziest voices speak for us. We're no longer surprised when the demonic shows up. The attitudes that deny human dignity, the powers that destroy life, the self-interest and greed that refuses to allow community to flourish. Are we really that surprised when there's another terrorist bombing, another mass shooting, another scandal?

We let those outer voices, whether it's the media, a parent, our spouse, a friend, have greater influence in our lives than the truth of the gospel.

We need someone, a different voice, to call us back to who we really are and belong to. We need to be reminded that our lives have become fragmented. That's what my parents did for me when they pulled me into line. It's what a pastor named Matt did for me when I described my restlessness to him. It's what my wife Kathy does for me when she says, "I miss you."

That's what Jesus is doing today in the synagogue. He's calling people back to the truth. The people want to know what Jesus has to do with them. "Have you come to destroy us?" The answer is yes. Jesus comes to destroy everything that's not created in his image. He comes to destroy the false voices in our lives. He comes to destroy the powers that diminish and deny the fullness of life and human dignity. He comes to destroy our false identities. Notice, however, that he doesn't exclude or reject the man with the unclean spirit. He clarifies for him that the unclean spirit is not his spirit. It's not a spirit of life. Jesus calls this man back to kingdom life.

It's also the moment that the man recognises Jesus. "I know who you are," he says, "the Holy One of God." That's something for us to hang onto. Even in the midst of our brokenness, there's still something within us that recognises the Holy One. No matter how lost we are in sin, the ability to recognise Jesus remains. The reason we can is because he dwells within us.

Jesus is the antidote to our alienation by sin. His gospel helps us to recognise the truth and the untruth about our lives, the beauty as well as the disfigurements, the places that are whole and the places that are broken.

As much as we may want to run from our brokenness, it's the place from which new life is born, the place that gives rise to new hope. The place that reminds us of our truest self - created in God's image.

That means recognition has to become an intentional spiritual practice. We must look critically at our lives, reflect deeply on the shape of our life, and wrestle with the difficult questions, and acknowledge our sin.

As tempting as it is to ignore or cover up our sin, it's even more tempting to project it onto others. The politicians, the biased media, bankers, lawyers, and insurance companies... they're the ones with the unclean spirit. They're to blame. That list is endless.

To go down that road is to live more deeply in my own self-exile. I don't like that place. That's not how I want to live or who I want to be. I want something more, something different, for my life.

In what ways are we lost to ourselves? What's broken? How are we an alien to our own life or a stranger in our own skin?

However we might answer those questions, Jesus enters the synagogue of our life and calls us back to the gospel of his saving love. He doesn't leave us estranged or rotting in sin. He stands with us in the midst of it, wooing us back to life. And he does it over and over. It might take a lifetime for us to recognise, but the gospel truth remains. Jesus is the Holy One of God, he has "all authority in heaven and on earth" [Matthew 28:18] and he throws out the garbage, leaving only the forgiven-blessed- and-restored-to-the-image-of-God, you. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.