

We Fight Injustice
Mark 1:21-28
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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It was the sabbath. The day when the regular routine was set aside and special space was made for God. People had gathered in the synagogue. As was the tradition, teaching was happening there. And on this day, Jesus was one of the teachers.

Already people had noted the authority with which he spoke. Perhaps, if we were reading this from Luke's gospel the story would include someone remembering how Jesus had engaged the teachers on the temple steps when he was still a boy.

It seems he was created to teach, given the authority to draw people in and to make a difference.

And yet, his teaching didn't take center stage that day. Rather there was what some might call a disruption. A person with an unclean spirit was also there. And the spirit cried out, questioning Jesus. Not just that, he cried out, identifying Jesus.

So Jesus responded, calling the unclean spirit out of the man...setting him free.

The reality is that there is a lot going on here in this story, and a lot that we struggle to understand. Even just the idea of unclean spirits is something that isn't really within our worldview. And the idea of exorcizing, or casting out, a spirit from a person is likely something that few, if any of us, have experienced beyond the movie screens of Hollywood.

And yet, if we can see beyond the theatrics of this moment, perhaps we can learn something about Jesus. And in learning something about him, we can learn something about what it means for us to follow him.

See, this story isn't only interesting in its content, but in its placement. In Mark's gospel, this is the first story of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus has been baptized...he has experienced temptation...in John's absence he has been proclaiming the good news...he has even gathered a few followers.

But this is the first story of his ministry where Mark gives us details. *And* it is a story of casting out an unclean spirit. So, why? Why do you suppose Mark starts there? Why do you suppose this is the story with which Mark sets the stage of Jesus' ministry?

We know that none of the gospel writers' first concern is a historically accurate timeline of events. Rather, they are each sharing the good news of Jesus through stories that help their audiences understand who he is. So, what is Mark trying to tell us when he starts the stories of Jesus' public ministry with this particular event?

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Perhaps there are several things. Mark certainly establishes Jesus' authority in this story. But more than that, he establishes which side Jesus is on. He names the conflict that is real between the realm of God and other authorities. After all, throughout Jesus' ministry, we see him standing against any and all powers that separate people from God, any and all powers that hold people in an unjust place.

As David Lose writes, "We can read this scene as Mark's signal that Jesus has come to oppose all the forces that keep the children of God from the abundant life God desires for all of us" ([Epiphany 4 B: First Things First | ...In the Meantime \(davidlose.net\)](http://www.davidlose.net)).

See there were many other ways that Jesus could have responded. He could have argued with the spirit. He could have asked others in the synagogue to send the man away, to kick him out and simply pretend the event didn't happen, pretend an unclean spirit wasn't there. He could have tried to ignore the spirit in hopes that he would leave on his own.

But Jesus did none of those things. Instead, he looked at the man who was possessed, he saw the difference between that man and the spirit who was speaking, and he called out the spirit in order that the man in whom he had taken up residence could be set free for fullness of life.

So, if we are followers of Jesus, does this mean that we will or should begin casting out unclean spirits from others? Again, I suspect most of us will never encounter such an opportunity or have such a skill set.

But, what if we look beyond the details of this situation to see the essence what Jesus was doing. Yes, in this case, we are told he cast out an unclean spirit. But I think again about that quote from David Lose saying "Jesus has come to oppose all the forces that keep the children of God from the abundant life God desires for all of us" ([Epiphany 4 B: First Things First | ...In the Meantime \(davidlose.net\)](http://www.davidlose.net)).

Maybe an unclean spirit and an exorcism are not required.

Perhaps our calling is to see the humanity in others and to do what we can to break down the barriers that keep them from fullness of life. Maybe our calling is to fight the injustices that keep people from being part of the community, that keep people from knowing the abundance of God's love.

Jesus was teaching. A man interrupted. But it wasn't really that man. Jesus was willing to see beyond the immediate nuisance of the situation and to see that that man was caught up in something outside his control. Jesus was willing to name that spirit and to respond to it rather than rejecting the man. And in doing so, he set the man free, free to remain in community and free to know the abundant life that God desires.

So, what are the unclean spirits of our day?

What are the barriers that keep people at bay, that separate people from community, that leave people feeling outside the reach of God's love?

What are the forces that keep children of God from abundant life?

And, are we willing to pay enough attention to notice them?

Are we willing to do the work of distinguishing between a person caught up in an unjust system or a personal affliction and the barrier that keeps them separated? Are we willing to see the humanity in each person we encounter?

And are we willing to challenge the powers that hold people at bay, that build barriers that keep some people from flourishing?

Are we willing to tell the truth about the things that keep people entangled and separated rather than rejecting others who are as much children of God as you and me?

Friends, this story - and Jesus' ministry - is about more than one unclean spirit on one day in one synagogue. It is a story about one who was willing to look at other people, to see what was separating them, to name the injustice of their situation, and to do what he had the power to do in order to set them free.

That was who Jesus was. And, as his followers, it is who we are called to be.