

The Goal of God's Kingdom (Mk 1:21-28)

What a day at the Synagogue! I'll bet news about Jesus spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. A new teacher with a fresh approach and an exorcism to boot. Talk about amazing! I don't know about you, but that would catch my attention—I'd want to know more. Evidently that's precisely what happened if you read further. They couldn't keep people away—they came in droves with their sick and afflicted hoping for release, and they weren't disappointed.

Of course, this is the point Mark wants to make with his take on the gospel story—in Jesus, something new had burst onto the scene, and the tired forms of what they had known of faith were being retired in the teaching of Jesus. His was a fresh approach that carried a different level of authority—one based in himself rather than the collected thoughts of previous teachers. And though Mark doesn't tell us the content of Jesus' teaching that day, it was likely consistent with the way Jesus taught during the Sermon on the Mount, where the topics were related to everyday life rather than meticulous scrutiny on a point of law, and it was based on an intimate knowledge of God—in other words, this is what God is like, and what God intends, and for that reason Jesus was able to say, "You've heard it said..., but I say to you..."

That was brash and bold, one might even say reckless as it didn't conform to the conventional understanding of faith—and you could have wondered, had you been in the synagogue that day: when will the synagogue leader step up and put an end to this wild approach? Maybe that leader was pondering the same thing—how long do I let this go on? But then they were all startled by the outburst from the man possessed by an impure spirit—what do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Clearly threatened, the spirit continued: Have you come to destroy us? Now what do you do if you're the synagogue leader or a teacher of the law? What a day he's suddenly having. We don't know if this man was a regular member of their community, or whether he just wandered in that day. Either way, it wasn't apparent to any of them that he was in that condition; hindsight fills in the gaps of understanding, but in the moment he may have simply appeared to be an irascible sort, a crotchety guy venting frustration—maybe he himself didn't realize what was happening in that moment, maybe he was just as startled as the others. In any event, this is suddenly a tense moment, to say the least, the outcome is unpredictable—it's doubtful Jesus had said anything about destruction, but now the suggestion of this hangs in the air. And before anyone can process this, the spirit ends the outburst with: I know who you are—the Holy One of God!

Of all the things the community might have expected him to say, that probably wasn't one of them. What could that mean? But Jesus understood what was happening, and as Brenna read for us moments ago, he dealt with it on that level by expelling the demon on the spot. And as the impure spirit leaves the man, the gathered community gets up to speed.

So what do we make of this for our purposes?

Just a few verses prior to this, Mark records the underlying basis of Jesus' ministry as the announcement of the arrival of God's kingdom—it had always been there, but it was now specially near through him. We're meant to understand this as a tangible reality, something that makes an actual difference in the world. The verification of this comes through an unlikely source—an impure spirit that reacts to the reality of that presence in Jesus. What wasn't explicitly clear in the temporal realm was readily apparent in the spiritual realm—in the face of the goodness of God embodied in the person of Jesus, evil had nowhere to hide—it was exposed for what it was, and it understood the outcome. The larger story here is that the ministry of Jesus energized by the grace of God displaces evil as it pervades creation. In this account it's personified in Jesus and the single entity of an impure spirit, but it represents the larger scope of God's purpose in reclaiming creation as the rightful place of harmonious fellowship between God and humanity, where God's goodness pours over humankind making it possible for people to live in right relationship to God, flourishing in God's lavish love, and subsequently living harmoniously with one another as originally intended in creation. This is what defines the good, and anything subverting this is identified as evil. Some evil is truly vile—and we'll consider this momentarily, but quite a bit of it, on the face of it seems rather benign—we sometimes dismiss it as harmless fun, or on the whole inconsequential or, perhaps,

misfortune when it happens to others. But in the light of God's goodness, anything that undercuts, or assaults God's values; anything that prevents God's purposes from taking hold in life, anything that obscures or exploits or manipulates the image of God in humankind qualifies as evil—that is, opposed to God, and it doesn't have to be dripping with slime, nor is it meant to be pejorative, it's just reality in the larger scheme of things.

This account, dramatic as it is, conveys the simple truth that good and evil do not peacefully coexist—they are not meant to. They are at odds for they serve opposing outcomes. Evil aims at deception, division, destruction, and death, whereas good fosters growth, mercy, edification, unity, truth, transparency, and life. Success in life is not about finding equilibrium in the mix of good and evil—this is a fool's errand. Success in life, defined as wholeness within the capacious love of God, comes about through embracing the good to such a degree that evil finds no room in one's life—it's a matter of displacement. This is what Jesus brought then and continues to offer today. It is the opportunity to be filled with the goodness of God meaning that our efforts at responding to God focus on receiving the full measure of what is good—what draws us to, what exemplifies, what causes God's life to flourish in us, and as this takes hold in us, evil loses its grip and our lives demonstrate the sensibility of living under the reign of God. This is the salvation that Jesus offers—the ability to live free from the grip of destructive tendencies that harm ourselves and others around us. But beyond its impact on us individually, living by the grace of God enables us to join in effecting salvation beyond ourselves in the world—whether across the street or across the globe. We are part of the pervasive presence of Christ in the world through which evil is displaced.

This is another piece of how this account speaks to us today. A huge aspect of the success of Christ's ministry in his day was that he not only taught about liberation and wholeness, he acted to bring it about. People discovered that the things against which they were helpless—impure spirits, sickness, deprivation, hypocrisy in religiosity, even death itself—these things were helpless against the liberating presence of Jesus. Evil was displaced as the power of God produced what was good. This remains true in our day.

We don't typically characterize people as inhabited by impure spirits, but the grip of destructive tendencies that assault human well-being in our day are every bit as strong and entrenched as any demon. We don't identify addiction, racism, pornography, or sex trafficking as demons, but they are demonic as they turn impulses into enslavement that shreds the soul. We don't think of rage, anger, contempt, envy, or greed as demons, but they are demonic in the sense that they cloud our vision, dull our senses, co-opt reason, and grease the skids of action that harms ourselves and others. The sad commentary of a list like this that could on and on is that evil still exists 2000 years after the announcement of Jesus that the kingdom had come. Jesus is still in the liberating business, and he carries out that work through us, his followers who have experienced his touch on our lives, and through his indwelling Spirit have the ability to not only teach about liberation and wholeness, but also to act in bringing it about.

It's crucial, then, for us as followers of Jesus to be people pervaded by the goodness of God so that we are clear-eyed and clear-minded to see and understand our purpose as we engage in Christ's work of liberation and wholeness. Too often, I fear and know from personal experience we have blunted our witness by failing to demonstrate the sensibility of life in Christ by being blind to the places in our lives where we have excluded the goodness of God from taking hold. Too often, I fear and know from personal experience, that we have invested more time in perfecting belief than offering relief. Too often, I fear and know from personal experience, we have focused on flaws in others and passed judgement rather than recognizing and encouraging just a sliver of goodness and passing bread.

Friends, perhaps this account will direct us into creating settings of safety and recovery where liberation and wholeness are pursued for the sake of those who are caught in the grip of something against which they are presently helpless. Sometimes this means getting involved in the difficult, often messy work of coming alongside people in pain—person to person work sustained through kindness, mercy, and long-suffering. In some cases it means getting involved in changing systems forged in evil that grind others down by indifference, or worse by intention. All of this is collaborative work undertaken by people touched by Christ's grace who

with his power combine their efforts to work towards outcomes that free others from the influence and grip of evil which subverts the purpose and intent of God. I don't know exactly how God will lead you or us together in this work, but one thing I do know—where the love of God breaks out and its effects make a tangible difference displacing the outcomes of evil, you won't be able to keep people away—they will come to find what they were created for. AMEN