

Authority To Set You Free
Don Lincoln
Mark 1: 21-28

A DEA officer stopped at a ranch in Texas and talked with an old rancher. He told the rancher, "I need to inspect every single one of your fields on this ranch for illegally grown drugs."

The rancher said, "Okay, but don't go in that field over there." (**pointing**)

The DEA officer verbally exploded saying, "Mister, I have the authority of the Federal Government with me!" Reaching into his rear pants pocket, he removed his badge and proudly displayed it to the rancher. "See this badge?! This badge means I am allowed to go wherever I wish on this ranch....on any land!! No questions asked or answers given!! Have I made myself clear? Do you understand THIS BADGE!?!?"

The rancher nodded politely, apologized, and went about his chores.

A short time later, the old rancher heard screams, looked up, and saw the DEA officer running for his life, being chased by the rancher's biggest, meanest bull. With every step the bull was gaining ground on the officer, and it seemed likely he'd gored before he reached the fence. The rancher threw down his tools, ran to the fence and yelled at the top of his lungs...

"Your badge! Your badge! Show him your BADGE!!"

Often you and I think we have WAY more authority than we really do – the power to control all things, the resources to manage everything around us. And we don't. A lesson we too often learn the hard way. The Good News in this text from Mark starts with the acknowledgement that Jesus DOES have the authority. He taught as one having authority – unlike anything they had seen or heard. And right there in the synagogue, they see He has the authority to command even the unclean spirits, and they obey.

This is the first ministry action Jesus takes in Mark. Jesus has been baptized, He has called His disciples, but this is His first ministry. It may be an indicator of what Mark thinks important – that at the heart of the mission of this Jesus' – is healing people of unclean spirits and setting them free.¹

Of course, the temptation with this passage is to too narrowly define unclean spirit.

One angle is to only consider this demon possession. And for many of us, that's easily dismissible – either because we don't believe in such things – or because we've never seen or experienced it. C. S. Lewis, a great Christian writer in his book *Screwtape Letters* – a dialogue between a senior devil and his nephew, a junior demon-in-training – reminds us that the best tool for the forces of evil in the world is to convince us all into thinking there **ARE** no forces of evil.

A discussion of the existence of evil is more than one sermon can undertake, but suffice it to say I see plenty of evidence of evil's existence. That's why our questions of membership ask: "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?" Because we know, evil has power.

Others look at this text and say "unclean spirit" was the first century's way of describing mental illness – because they didn't have psychodynamic explanations for such behavior. But even then – the moment we declare that the issue for the man in this story must have been mental illness, we easily remove ourselves from the story – because for most of us, that's not our condition. (Although if you ask some of the people we live with, they might have an alternative opinion!!!).

The fact of the matter – in the Greek, unclean means impure and the reality is you see here in the face of the confrontation of the Holy One anything in the face of holiness may be unclean or impure. This man is "every man" and "every woman" – in the presence of the holy.² Our obsessions, our addictions, our anxieties, our prejudices, our personality quirks, the things that push our buttons – we all in our own way, bear the shortcomings of being human. That's why Jesus came.

How much better it is for all of us, if we widen our definition of unclean spirit – because otherwise you and I will pick and choose who THOSE people are – the UNCLEAN ones. Over the years I've heard unclean spirit applied to many – not just mentally ill, but addicts, people of color, LBGTQ, the undocumented, the immigrant, people with disabilities, ex-felons, veterans from certain wars, even the poor. "Unclean!"

Yesterday I buried Nick – a 22 year old who got hold of some bad stuff and died of an accidental overdose. I remember recognizing him for his first communion in this sanctuary years ago.

You and I know that's what the unclean spirit of addiction can do. Devour the best of what God plants in us, deceiving us with false truths and short-lived relief. Beckoning us with the illusion of pleasure, and instead enslaving us in its hell. The funeral director said they're doing at least one a week. And I'm getting tired of doing them too.

I spent last weekend with the Princeton Theological Seminary Board of Trustees which includes some college presidents and university leaders from as far away as England and Korea. And they tell me they're seeing a generation of young people who are more anxious, more depressed than ever before. 62% of college students in 2016 reported overwhelming anxiety at some point in the previous year.³ I don't know what the

problem is – maybe it's that our children aren't being raised to handle disappointment; they all need a participant's trophy; they haven't been told by anybody that you can't have everything you want. (That's a good thing to learn about life!). I don't know what the problem is, but I know we – people of faith – have something to offer.

You and I believe in a God who stands steadfastly against all the forces that are knocking people down. A God who is opposed to anything and everything that robs any one of His children of abundant life. A higher power who alone is the answer to whatever ails us, and has the authority over every unclean spirit out there.

Addiction? Belligerent or unsafe working conditions? Situations where power is abused or harassment or discrimination or prejudice are tolerated? Lack of access to housing, education, or medical treatment? God is against these things – -- these unclean spirits – and not just theoretically.⁴

God is against them and calls on the Body of Christ to address whatever unclean spirits are robbing God's children of abundant life – and calls us to address them directly and with courage, to speak the truth in love.

As we envision our life and ministry together for the next 3-5 years – what is it God is calling us to? How is it that the power and authority of God's spirit might be present in and through this congregation in such a way that people are more and more set free from whatever binds them, and holds them captive? That's what God is calling us to.

May it be so.
AMEN.

1. David Lose, "In the Meantime....."; www.davidlose.com; January 26, 2018.
2. Andrew Prior, www.onemansweb.org, "What is Unclean," January 24, 2018./
3. American College Health Association, national College Health Assessment, Executive summary, Fall 2016.
4. Lose, op. cit.