

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
4 Epiphany, January 31, 2021 by the Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Psalm 11, Mark 1:21-28

St. Paul grabbed my attention in the opening lines of today's reading from 1 Corinthians. He said: "All of us think we possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge..."

Down through history, we human beings have always been tempted to think we know many more things that we actually know. We tend to hold passionately to what we think we know. Right now in 2021, our country is polarized and divided by people who hold many different perspectives and are arrogantly confident that they know what is best for our country. The fact that all sides insist on getting their own way is tearing our nation apart and even tearing Christians apart.

Paul goes on to say that while knowledge puffs up with arrogance and a sense of self-superiority and rejection of anyone who may not agree with us...love builds up. Love helps us to listen to those who are different and have different perspectives. Love for God and neighbor and self opens us up to be curious and eager to learn more, see a larger perspective. Love increases the mutual respect and harmony in our relationships with others, including those who see and experience and think about life differently than we do. Knowledge puffs up but love builds up. Paul's words are deep wisdom for us to reflect on personally and as a nation.

We get more insight into the difference between our very limited human knowledge and God's life-giving love in today's Gospel. Mark begins to tell the story of the life of Jesus by describing Jesus' first act of public ministry. This first healing miracle demonstrates the message and transforming power Jesus brings to help the human race become more like what God created us to become.

One surprise in this passage is that there is not even one word or phrase to tell what Jesus actually said in his first public sermon. All Mark tells us is that people were astounded by his teaching because he taught with unique sense of authority and authenticity. He was not like their religious leaders who seemed superficial in their sermons compared to Jesus. What was different, which they could not identify, was that the Holy Spirit flowed through Jesus. They sensed a deeper wisdom, power and love from God at work in and through Jesus. It was the Presence of Jesus, more than his specific words, that astounded people. This was a different kind of human being than they had ever experienced.

Then, in the middle of his sermon, a man stands up and interrupts, crying 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."

Who is this man? What causes him to interrupt and shout out these words? Mark tells us that he had an "unclean spirit." Some translations say, "an evil spirit". We don't talk about

unclean or evil spirits in 2021 America. We might have said the man was mentally ill. And that could be possible. We don't know. Yet Mark is pointing us to something deeper than mental illness. He is demonstrating that Jesus came with loving power and authority to free and heal us human beings from powers that threaten to destroy us from within and without.

Unclean or evil spirits work to control, damage and divide people both internally and externally. In contrast, the more powerful Holy Spirit of Jesus comes to love, heal and bring people into loving harmony with God, each other and themselves. That is what people saw happen in the synagogue that day.

Surprisingly, the evil spirit of this man, recognized Jesus for who he was, the Holy One of God. He knew that Jesus had come to free people from bondage to their fears and self-destructive spirits. So the God-resistant spirit in the man was afraid...because it knew that Jesus had come to drive out or release the man from the controlling power of that spirit and bring the Holy Spirit of Love into the guiding center of the man's life. While the people in the synagogue just thought of Jesus as an amazing teacher, the unclean or demonic spirit knew there was a life-changing, reorienting, saving power at work in this Jesus. He was much more than just a good teacher.

How did Jesus transform the man? First Jesus spoke, not to the man as a person, but to the spirit that was controlling him. "Be silent and come out of him." This is when the people in the congregation saw the power and authority flowing from Jesus into the man. The unclean, demonic or destructive spirit convulsed the man, perhaps like an epileptic seizure, while the man kept crying out at the loss of what once was the controlling center of his life. Soon the convulsing and screaming stopped and the man stood there, in his right mind, his new grounding, new identity, freed from the debilitating spirit that once controlled his life.

People who are heavily addicted to alcohol or drugs often go through convulsive and painful withdrawals or detox when they stop using their life-controlling drug. Often their family and friends don't know how to deal with their newfound sobriety. Being freed from a self-destructive way of living and transitioning into a new healthy way of being and living can be a painful and challenging process, like the man in the synagogue experienced that day.

Notice, the first thing Jesus did to bring healing to the man was to say to the voice of the evil spirit within him: Be silent. Be still.

Most of us do not recognize the many voices within our minds and emotions which control us. We often don't see the fears, the memories, the addictions, the lies and false information we tell ourselves and others tell us, that unconsciously control us and keep us from being the loved and loving people God created us to be in our daily lives.

In order to be healed from things that bind and diminish us, we have to quiet the many voices that speak to us both internally and externally...as Psalm 46 says, "Be still and know that I am God." Be still and recognize the destructive powers that try to control us and the society around us. Be still and know that Jesus has come to heal us with his Spirit of love so that we can live in loving harmony with God, with our neighbors, with ourselves, with God's whole creation.

One gift of our Covid restrictions is that some people have taken the opportunity to slow down, be still and listen more deeply to themselves, to others, to God.

When we allow the Loving Spirit of Jesus to flow into our minds, bodies, memories, fears...the destructive spirit is driven out of us. God begins to liberate us from the false spirits, false knowledge, false identity that once controlled our lives in ways that were destructive to us personally and destructive to our neighbors around us, destructive to the creation, destructive to our relationship with God.

Mark wants us to know at the very beginning of his Gospel that Jesus came to heal and liberate, not just that man in the synagogue, but to heal and liberate all people and the whole cosmos from the spirits and powers that try to control us, to divide, diminish and destroy us personally and as societies. Jesus came to fill us with God's life-giving, renewing Spirit of Love which sets us free to be people of love who embody and spread God's love by who we are, what we say and think and do.

How do we carry on this healing, liberating ministry of Jesus in our generation? Notice that while Jesus spoke to everyone in the synagogue that day, he did not instantly heal every person who was there. Jesus just healed that one man who cried out to him. Jesus' transforming way of love seems to be passed on to one person at a time. We need to begin this process by asking Jesus to fill us with his Spirit of love every day, to heal us from the things that bind us. Then Jesus sends us out to be channels of God's healing, liberating love with the people we meet, one by one. Christians are not mass produced. God transforms us one by one as we are silent...and listen to the liberating spirit of Jesus calling us to let go of the powers that have controlled us...and allow the Spirit of Jesus to lead us into the new way of life which is guided and empowered by the love of God.

Let us close our eyes and be still in the loving Presence of God, who is with you now, right where you are:

How might Jesus be inviting you to look at your life differently this week as a result of today's Scriptures?...

Let me suggest a little spiritual exercise for each of us to practice this week. We'll begin right now, very briefly. And I encourage you to practice this four step exercise later today and several times this week.

- 1) First, as we are doing now, find a time and place to be silent, both externally and internally, knowing that God's loving Presence is there with you...
- 2) After a few moments in the silence, ask Jesus to help you be aware of any destructive spirits or habits or attitudes that control you and keep you from being the fully loving person God created you to be...
- 3) Then ask Jesus to set you free from any destructive spirits or patterns in your life by pouring a fresh transfusion of his loving, liberating Holy Spirit into your body, mind and

spirit. Open your hands right now as a sign of opening your full self to receive what the Spirit of Jesus wants to be and do in your life at this moment...

- 4) Next, ask Jesus to help you recognize how God wants you to allow his love to flow through you into the lives of others this week...

Are there people in your life who, like the man in the synagogue, need you to speak a healing word of God's love and encouragement into their troubled lives?...

Are there ways in which Christ's Spirit of love is inviting you to speak and act to bring healing to the people and places which are hurting our nation and world? ...

O Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.