

Sermon January 31, 2021  
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Have you ever witnessed a person "having a fit"? I'm not talking about a toddler throwing a tantrum. I'm talking about an adult who is experiencing some kind of an uncontrollable, physical, emotional frenzy. That's what happened to the man with the unclean spirit in today's gospel and only once have I witnessed someone undergo such a spasm.

It was many years ago while I was in my first parish. I had conducted a funeral for a woman who had long suffered from heart problems. While her daughter was faithful in her church attendance, the woman's husband had little time for the church. But he was overwhelmed by the loss of his companion of many years. And so on the Sunday following the funeral, the young woman brought her father to church.

Now this was a small, rural, country church. We had only six rows of pews and our time together was usually very cozy and intimate. It was almost time for the service to begin. The organist had finished her prelude, the candles were lit, and the woman and her grieving father were sitting in the third row on the left side of the altar. I was just about to begin my announcements when it happened.

The man suddenly arose from his seat only to fall violently to the floor and, without warning or concern for those around him, he proceeded to flop about on the floor like a large fish thrown upon the bank of a river. Not only did he thrash about but proceeded to shout out "Jesus...help me!". These petitions to our Lord were followed by a great amount of swearing and a lot of unintelligible gibberish. I didn't know what to do. I was a young, 26 year old pastor and we hadn't covered this in seminary. There wasn't even a telephone in this rural church and so someone ran to the farmhouse across the street to call the rescue squad which was some 20 miles away.

I was serving a multipoint parish. This was a 9:00 a.m. service which means that I needed to be in my truck no later than 10:15 .m. and make my way to Port Wing some thirty miles away. We decided to moved the congregation to the basement and hold the service there while the young woman remained with her father. But we remained very much mindful of the man upstairs for we could hear him screaming and pounding on the floor. I should mention that he had a prosthesis . . . a wooden leg . . . which he continually banged on the tile floor of the sanctuary. Eventually the rescue squad arrived and I was able to make it to Port Wing just in time for the eleven o'clock service.

Visiting with him the next day in the hospital, the man was embarrassed, sorry and perplexed. He had found himself at the end of his rope and he did not know where to go . . . so he came to church.

Let us leave this man for a moment and consider the gospel text before us. This is early on in Jesus' ministry. He was in Capernaum on the Sabbath and the synagogue was the logical place to be. And while he was there, "he taught them as one having authority." His was the "important" teaching.

He was not just another run of the mill itinerant rabbi. This "authority" is very important as we

consider what happened next. Seemingly out of nowhere appears a man “with an unclean spirit”.

He speaks to Jesus, “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.”

Jesus reprimands the spirit, that is, drives it out. The man convulses (has a fit) and then he is at peace.

The authority of Jesus is that which brings peace in to our lives. As we are all aware, there are an awful lot of self-help books out there. And some of them work . . . some provide relief and help, but they do not all provide peace. That is because they don't have the same kind of authority. I know, I sound picky, but this is important.

In the summer of 1973, I was a student chaplain at the Nova Scotia Hospital . . . a large mental health facility in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada. It was there that I learned the story of Bobbie, a young woman who had been a patient at the hospital for some time. Bobbie was severely affected by a form of manic-depression as she moved from bizarre hyperactivity to near catatonic withdrawal. She brought great distress on those who lived with her. In her depression, she had to be fed. In her manic state she was uncontrollable. Her case was deemed hopeless.

It was then that one of the hospital chaplains made Bobbie her project. Her healing was not immediate, but that does not make it less remarkable. With patient and careful counsel over a period of 18 months; Bobbie regained her self esteem; created an independent living environment for herself; renewed her driver's license; and eventually opened a half-way house for persons recovering from similar depression. The key to her recovery, she said, was found in the fact that another human being genuinely cared for her long after she had stopped caring for herself. It was Christian compassion—Christian love. That is the authority. That is the difference that this connection with Christ can bring to our lives.

We circle back to the man in my first parish who had a fit. He was at the end of his rope. He came to church, in part, as a recognition of the “authority”. He didn't go to the tavern, as in the past, for the “authority” was not there.

We gather for worship week after week in recognition of the authority. There are many in our world today who are at the end of their ropes. They cry out, all too often to deaf ears. Let us hear their cries and let us respond. Let us respond as a people who live in the authority. Let us be the ones who care for these even after they have stopped caring for themselves. In Christ's name, let us do this.