

Mark 1:21-28

Babe Ruth was the great home run hitter for the New York Yankees baseball team. During one particular at-bat, the umpire, Babe Pinelli, called Ruth out on strikes. There was a stunned silence in the stands. Ruth turned to Pinelli and said, "There are 40,000 people here who know that last one was a ball." Pinelli replied, "Maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts."

We live in a world of thousands of opinions. Whose opinion counts? Who has the authority that matters? There are experts in every field imaginable, some of whom say conflicting things. Who do we look to as our authority?

There are huge issues like global warming, poverty, homelessness, war to name a few. They need to be discussed, and there are good arguments on both sides. Absolute certainty is difficult to arrive at, and nobody will know for sure who's correct until events have played themselves out over a period of years. Because the answers are so unknowable, and because any conclusion we might come to would have minimal effect on the course of events anyway, many times we listen to all the opinions and none of them counts more heavily with us than any other. Since we don't think anyone really knows, and since the decision doesn't depend on us, it doesn't seem terribly critical that we settle on which authority we will go with.

But we know that there are other times when the issues hit closer to home. They are personal. And we know that the course of action is entirely within our control. The outcome rests entirely on the decision we make. At times like these, the question

becomes more critical and penetrating. Who determines what I will decide, which direction I will go? Whose opinion do I listen to? Who becomes my authority?

There were some people living in a lakeside community in the first century who were grappling with such questions: Who should we listen to? Who should we look to for direction? Who's an authority on the important matters of life? In fact, a new teacher in the area, Jesus, was forcing them to grapple with such questions. He had been traveling around their province for the past few months, and they had heard good things about him. A few weeks ago he had come to their lakeside community, and some of their most prominent businessmen—Philip, Nathaneal, Andrew and Peter - leaders in the fishing industry—had started spending some time with him. The last few weekends, he had been speaking in their synagogue services. Now the townspeople were trying to come to some conclusion about him.

When Jesus taught, he spoke with a certainty that came from the Father above. His words had authority. They had the ring of truth. And the people said: His words have an authority.

But then one Sabbath, something happened: a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

The thing that was scary for the people was not the presence of the demon, but Jesus' power over it. Jesus simply speaks, and the demon has to leave. Jesus simply makes the decision, "This is not going to be," and the matter is settled. He just says it, and it's done. This is a bit more than they can handle.

With us, it's the other way around. The thought of a demon actually being in someone, making them do something, sounds strange, even scary, to us. We seldom explain anyone's behavior as being caused by a demon.

On a lesser scale, we sometimes encounter self-destructive behavior that just doesn't make sense. These actions are not "demonic" but rather cause us not experience abundant life the way God intends.

An eating disorder—anorexia or bulimia—which brings tragedy and crisis on a daily basis. Teenage anger or hatred or rebellion that goes beyond the ordinary desire for independence and freedom. Addictions to drugs and alcohol that take over individual lives. A person at work who seems driven by the desire to humiliate others—compelled to dominate and abuse and inflict misery. We see such things and say, "What makes individuals be do that?" We do not have the answer.

The very first thing Jesus does in Mark's Gospel is cast out an unclean spirit. We can easily imagine its impact and effects on the life of the man this spirit holds captive.

He has likely become a danger to himself and others. If he hasn't already, he will likely soon be socially ostracized. And we can imagine the distress of those who love him. Anguish over his plight, fear about his future.

And the first thing Jesus does is free this man from the hold of his unclean spirit and restore him to himself, his loved ones, and his community. The very first thing.

Jesus frees the possessed man of his distress.

There are many forces in this world that seek to keep us down. They are forces aiming to prevent us from experiencing abundant life. God is prepared to protect us. Remember though, God is opposed to anything and everything that robs us of abundant life. God is prepared to do battle with those who seek to rob our lives of joy, meaning, and purpose.

Ultimately, God is willing, eager, and committed to doing all of this for us...and for *all* of God's children.

Thanks be to God. Amen.