

## JESUS, REFORMER

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 29, 2012

Text: Mark 1:21-28

Jesus is the new guy in town, and he definitely has some ideas.

We are only about fifty seconds into the gospel of Mark. For the very first time in this Gospel, the stage is set for an encounter between Jesus and the people to whom he was sent. This is his debut. Downtown Capernaum, opening night. "Break a leg!"

He teaches, and they are impressed. Astounded. But someone speaks out. No, someone *cries* out. Three pungent sentences, and there is a world of meaning in them.

*"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."*



A heckler. What will Jesus do now?

They know what the Scribes would do in a situation like this. They would rebuke the man with a spirit, and send him out of the synagogue. They always did.

Which was kind of sad. Because, you know, you had to feel sorry for the man with the demon. If anyone, he was the guy who needed to be here in the synagogue with God's word. And didn't they all have problems of their own? What a pity. Still, this was a holy place, and you couldn't have nonsense like that.

What will Jesus do?

The whole of the Gospel is exemplified in this anecdote. For a good reason, the author placed this right here, at the beginning. Here is the situation of the world; here are the problems; the attempts to get them right; and what it is about Jesus that makes us believe in him, rather than doubt.

This charming world is such a mess. And you know, the worst of it may be that every time you go to straighten it out, you get such a reaction from people. Why is "reform" such a difficult, painful, unpopular thing?

I'm not just talking about reforming the way you sort the laundry; or forming better tooth-brushing habits. I mean, why are people so balky about reforming Wall Street? Or health care? Or regional transportation? Don't we all want to make sure people get paid fair wages? And at the same time, do whatever we can to make sure everyone actually earns what they get paid? If Diogenes the cynic were alive today, we could send him out with his lamp and ask him to find **one**, just **one** citizen who believes that the U.S. Tax Code is just and fair. So why don't we reform it? I recommend that you read a piercing article in the current New Yorker, about the

appalling way our country uses imprisonment. And the dreadful consequences we are bringing on ourselves because we indulge so freely in this practice.

But just try to reform something. Good luck. Do you think there is less abuse of alcohol in this country since they banned liquor from sponsoring sporting events? Are movies more wholesome since they institute the rating system?

Enough. I hope I have made my point.

(I earned my spurs as a reformer convincing a congregation to use larger offering envelopes!)

Into Capernaum, into the synagogue, strides Jesus, followed by a few fishermen, and starts speaking with authority. Not like those scribes.

And a heckler, a demon in one man, cries out.

Expressing what they were all thinking: "Yes." But "No!"

"Yes! This is the way to go." But,

"No! This will ruin everything."

They know he is right. But they do not like the price tag.

That's always the problem, with reform. Except for the new diet plan I heard advertised, which claimed that you don't need to exercise *or* change your eating habits. Oh, and it's free, too!

The price of Capernaum staying the way it was? Slow but inevitable ruin. The price of changing and making everything right? Immediate ruin.

They couldn't all just change and start being the kind of people Jesus was talking about! They still had scores to settle! It would be fine if they could stop paying on their own mortgage; but what would they do, if they stopped being able to collect from the guy who owed them?

But Jesus speaks with such authority. Should they obey him?

There are two places in the Gospel of Mark where the word "obey" is used. Mark 8: "Even the winds and the waves obey him!" And here in chapter 1: "Even the unclean spirits obey him!" In Matthew it is used once, in chapter 28, where his disciples are commissioned to go into the whole world and make disciples of all people, teaching us to obey all that he has commanded us.

Which makes us want to know, just as the people of Capernaum wanted to know: What will happen if we listen to this guy?

When the heckler cries out, we are about to find out the difference in the reform Jesus brings. It is not a reform grounded in wisdom; or grounded in power; but in love. Jesus does not condemn the heckler, does not destroy him with a vicious barb; does not evict him; but loves him. And loving him, saves him from his trouble by evicting the evil spirit.

Every human reform runs afoul of the human problem that we do not actually love our neighbors the way we love ourselves. And people who are not our neighbors? Thank goodness God doesn't command us to love them! (Or does he?)

But the salvation Jesus begins to effect when he announces the Gospel in Capernaum, and invites people to reform—I mean, repent and believe in that Good News, is an intervention with the power to rectify what is most wrong in us—that left to ourselves, our lack of faith in our one heavenly Father makes us allergic to every sacrifice that benefits someone else more than it benefits ourselves.

Everything Jesus does for all of us is epitomized in his action towards the man with a demon inside him. Jesus rebukes him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”

What has he done?

The demon, you will notice, identifies the Holy One of God with destruction. “Have you come to destroy us?” He wants the rest of the people to believe that God is mean. He wants us to resent God. He wants us to think that we have to take care of ourselves here. Every man for himself! Because God, being holy, surely wouldn’t be a friend to us, would he?

And he is right. The holiness of God will destroy the sanctimonies of people, the rationalizations by which we consider ourselves to be better than others. Better to keep the holy away, if we want to continue in our daydream of self-worth, self-righteousness, self-vindication, maintaining our rights.

But what if the demon is wrong? What if the holiness of God actually desires us to live? What if God’s word comes to earth for the purpose, not of removing us bad people from earth, but of removing from us the sin and guilt which bug everything we do?

And this is what Jesus does: he casts out, not the demon-possessed man, but the demon. And does the same for us, through the forgiveness of our sins. Every week, he casts out of each of us all that is wrong, and gives us back the freedom of the synagogue. And renews our relationships with the brothers and sisters around us, not on the basis of “nobody’s perfect,” but of “we’re all holy.”

This is just a starting point, in the salvation of the world. Everything is not made better all at once. But it is good, every chance we can, to return, repent of our desire to make everybody *else* act better, to be in the presence of the only holy one, and to receive from him the cleansing gift that will enable us to stop speaking with the voice of something else, and to speak to the world, the truth of God’s love. Amen.