

I Know Who You Are

Mark 1:21-28

January 31, 2021

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

I began to get to know a new person this week. That seems like a normal thing, but it's become rare in pandemic times. I have no idea what this person looks like, but I have now emailed back and forth a few times and talked with him on the phone. His name is Dennis, and he's the chaplain that serves our hospital here in Luling. He told me he's here three days a week, and the other two days a week, he works as chaplain at the main Seton hospital on 38<sup>th</sup> street in Austin, the big one. That's some significant work whiplash, I'd say. Everything from traffic to the number of patients he sees in a day to the number of steps he takes walking around the hospital is completely different. Anyway. I really enjoyed beginning to get to know Dennis. But I don't really *know* him.

Because there are levels of how we know people, right? There are people we recognize but don't know their names—they're something less than acquaintances. For instance the clerk at the post office or the guy that works at the gas station. Then there are acquaintances, and I think Dennis now falls into this category for me, people that we have had a conversation with, people we've met in normal times, but we probably don't know much about their families and certainly don't know much about their struggles or triumphs. And then we move into friendships of various levels. Work friends, "our kids are the same age" friends, high school friends, college friends, neighbor friends. If you're like most people, only a few of those friends really know you. Maybe even none of them. Maybe it's just your spouse or your sibling maybe that really know you. And even that's limited. It's hard to know, really really know, another person.

In the Gospel of Mark, especially in the first half, Jesus's identity is supposed to be a secret. He's always telling people to hush up about who he is. There's even a name for it: the messianic secret. That Jesus is the Messiah is supposed to be a secret until he is ready for that truth to be revealed.

Today's passage is really very close to the beginning of the story. Remember there's no Christmas or childhood stories. Mark just starts with Jesus being baptized, then Jesus being sent out into the wilderness, then last week's story of the first disciples being called from their fishing nets, that Sallie talked about. And then today's passage is Jesus's first public practice of ministry.

The disciples don't know him yet, not like they will. They've not spent a lot of time together, especially in the rushed, hurried way that Mark describes things. The congregation at the synagogue in Capernaum doesn't know him at all. Capernaum wasn't that far from Nazareth, and there is considerable speculation among scholars that perhaps Jesus and his family had actually settled down in Capernaum, because he seems to be at home there and familiar with the town and its inhabitants.

So really nobody knows him that day in Capernaum. The disciples are just getting to know him, still maybe a bit uneasy about their quick decision to follow him. But there Jesus is in the synagogue, teaching in such a way that it makes him stand out from the other teachers.

And then there is Jesus's first of many encounters with a person who has an unclean spirit. Another time, it would be good for us to talk about what that means. We of course have no clear idea, because our culture and understanding are so far from the Gospel writers, but let's try to stay within the story and take Mark at his word that the man had an unclean spirit.

And what is astonishing is that this unclean spirit knows Jesus. Listen carefully to what it says: "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." The unclean spirit knows Jesus's name. And more than that, the unclean spirit knows Jesus. Knows that he is holy. And knows that he belongs to God. Knows who Jesus is. Really knows. It knows Jesus with such depth and truth, that Jesus immediately tells it to be silent.

Mark mostly intends this story to establish Jesus's authority in both teaching and casting out unclean spirits. We know this because he repeats it at the beginning and the end—maybe you remember us talking before about how Mark likes to do that, make sandwiches of somewhat related events. So the declaration of Jesus' authority is the bread of this sandwich, and the encounter with the unclean spirit is the peanut butter.

Right there in the middle of the sandwich, is this encounter with this man who has no authority whatsoever, this encounter with the spirit who knows exactly and precisely who Jesus is. In the midst of the holy space of the synagogue and in the midst of the holy time of the Sabbath, the Holy One of God encounters the unholy, unclean spirit.

Of all the people present, people who would eventually come to know the truth about Jesus, and would eventually come to *know* Jesus, it is this unclean

spirit who knows, instantly, deeply, knows not in a theoretical sense but in a real sense, who Jesus is.

So maybe we're feeling held captive by some kind of unholy spirit. Fear. Restrictions. Addictions. Family conflict. Grief. Illness. Maybe we're so controlled by our desire for cleanness and safety that that desire has itself become something unclean for our spirits. Maybe we feel like we have little control over those things, over our lives at all. What does this passage have to say to us?

It seems to me that it is telling us that when we are feeling constrained and constricted, out of control of ourselves, overwhelmed and at the end of our tethers, when we feel like we might just be possessed by an unclean spirit ourselves, however strange that sounds to our modern ears, well this might be precisely the time that we can recognize Jesus instantly, that we can know Jesus at a deeper level, that we can speak our faith because it's all we have left to hold on to.

I'm not wanting to say that we need to seek out these feelings of being captive, but when they come, because they will come, that we notice what we see more clearly and intensely, that we see Jesus in our midst, that we know Jesus not in a theoretical way, but really *know* him.