

Fame and Demons

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:21-28

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Community of Joy Lutheran Church

Hot Springs Village, Arkansas

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I. Let's review some of the high-points of the last two weeks (in regard to our Bible texts and my messages about them).

A. We have been commanded by God, through Jesus, to: 1) invite others to worship; 2) tell others about Jesus; spread the Good News; 3) "Come and see." We are to let others know that our love of Jesus is important to us and then invite them to "come and see" for themselves; 4) "Fish for people." Jesus commands us to "fish for people" - to cast out the invitation and then let God be responsible for "the catch."

B. Today we can add another "requirement" to that list. We are to "spread Christ's fame." I realize that the words "spread Christ's fame" are not used in the reading from Mark for today, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to pull that "requirement" out of this reading. We are certainly commanded to "spread the Good News of Jesus Christ." Part of that Good News is stated in the text for today.

C. Saint Mark says, "They were amazed, and they kept asking one another, 'What is this? He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee" (Mark 1:27-28).

D. Jesus was becoming famous - and why was that? He was different than any other prophet they had ever seen or heard about. He did even more remarkable things than the other prophets had done; and “even the unclean spirits obey him!” Even demons - agents of Satan - obeyed this Jesus, and that lends a great deal of credibility to his claims as the Son of God!

E. Demons and fame; fame and demons. Is there a connection here? Certainly this act of “expulsion of the demon” got the attention of those around Jesus at that time. His “fame” began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. A few months earlier almost no one had heard of this Jesus of Nazareth, and now he was quickly becoming famous.

F. That still happens in our world. On this Superbowl Sunday I’ll use a football analogy that helps make this point. Try to remember back to the year 2000. At the beginning of that pro-football season almost no one had ever heard of a quarterback named Kurt Warner. A few months before the season started - that year - Kurt had been stocking shelves at some grocery store. But, as we approached the Superbowl in January 2000, every pro-football fan knew who Kurt Warner was. He had risen to great fame in four months as the winning quarterback of the St. Louis Rams. He did some fantastic things - his team won - and then “everybody” knew him. He had great fame (he does again this year, but that’s another story!).

G. The same type of thing was happening to Jesus - for quite different reasons. This unknown from Nazareth - this “rookie prophet” (if you will) was moving away from the “pack.” He was doing things that were astounding those who followed him. Mark says, “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them with authority, and not

as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). This guy “Jesus” was different! Maybe he was the Messiah! Could he actually be the One sent by God?

II. But, what is this thing with demons? Do we really believe that there were demons as described in the Bible?

A. Let’s think about them as “spirits.” If we believe that there is such a thing as the Holy Spirit then why not “unholy” spirits? Demons and evil spirits are very prevalent in the gospels. There is absolutely zero-doubt that Jesus believed that evil spirits existed. As his ministry is presented to us in the Gospel of Mark - we are confronted by spirits - holy and otherwise - early on. In the first chapter of Mark - Jesus is baptized by John in the River Jordan and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. After this baptism, the scripture says that the “Spirit immediately drove him (Jesus) out into the wilderness” (v. 12).

B. Jesus then spends the first 40 days of his ministry in the desert where he was tempted by Satan - the master of all evil spirits - the lord of the demons! After Jesus comes out of the wilderness, he invites several people to follow him in his ministry (Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John) and then we come to the beginning of his preaching and teaching and healing ministry. In Mark 1:21 we are given a summation of the reason Jesus came into the world. It says he came to destroy evil!

C. If all evil is destroyed - we are left with only love. We also must remember that God is love, therefore we are left with God. So, in this world, we have good and evil - or God and evil (Satan). If evil is destroyed and cast out by Jesus - then only love will remain, and that, my sisters and brothers in Christ, is the definition of heaven - being with God - surrounded by love!

D. There will be no evil there. Notice the future tense that was used in that sentence - “there will be.” There still is evil, but Jesus, working through people like us, is currently bringing forth the Kingdom of God as we - servants of Jesus Christ - do what God would have us do to minimize evil. We are to spread love, peace, joy, and hope and work toward eradicating evil. It certainly won’t happen fully until Jesus returns again, but that doesn’t lessen our mission to spread God’s love, and in so doing, destroy much of the evil in the world.

III. But, in this post-modern world, have you ever seen someone who is demon-possessed?

A. Do we think that “demon-possessed humans” ceased to exist when Jesus left this world? We hear of demon-possession and we tend to think of people foaming at the mouth and acting as if they had rabies. There probably was some of that with folks who were possessed by medical demons. However, I think that today many people just don’t think demons still exist. What do you think?

B. The fact is - in the time of Jesus the people had no question about the existence of demons. They most likely felt that they had almost daily association with demons. The collective word for demons is *mazzikin* - which means “one who does harm.” Demons are entities that set out to do harm to humans. According to Jewish beliefs, demons could eat, drink, and have children. They were considered to be everywhere.

C. The Jews also thought that when the Messiah came - demons would be no more (the Messiah would eradicate all demons). The fact that Jesus cast out the demon of the man with the unclean spirit signaled to everyone around Jesus that he truly could possibly

be the Messiah!

D. But, are demons still with us? Do we really still have demons here on earth? I believe so. Whether they have horns and a pitchfork or they just have a long glass neck and a twist-off cap - demons still steal joy, take hope away, and drain our spiritual strength.

E. Demons are those things that turn our lives into a burden and make life miserable. If those are really the characteristics of demons, then we can agree that our world is constantly being challenged by demons. Demons are the things that control us - rather than us being able to control them. Today, in our society, there are all kinds of demons: alcohol, drugs, anxiety, worry, doubt, sex, fear, loneliness, and greed - just to mention a few. And demons get the upper hand when we feel powerless to control them (or to rid ourselves of them), whether the demon is the bottle or our credit card.

F. The message that we can take away from this gospel text for today is this: Jesus Christ has the power to drive away our demons! Let's be very clear, though, that this process of driving away demons takes effort and does not always come easily. In the story of the demon-possessed man, the man convulsed and his body shook. The people watching this episode had to step back because of the intensity of it all.

G. If any of you have ever tried to stop smoking - and an addiction to smoking and nicotine can certainly be a demon - then you certainly realize that it isn't done very easily. It takes great effort and will-power, and there are many temptations to retain the demon-activity. The same is true with getting rid of our demons. It takes great effort and the strength and power of Jesus Christ to assist us. We cannot do it on our own. We can now realize that Jesus came to

face evil squarely in the eye and to drive the demons away - that is to drive away all of those things that get in the way of our right relationship with God and keep us from becoming the people that God intends us to be. God wants us to be righteous, just, holy and good.

H. It takes faith to believe that Jesus can and will drive away our demons. And we are given a clue about this power in the Epistle reading for today. In 1st Corinthians 8:1b & 3, Paul says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up..., anyone who loves God is known by God." Love is the answer then. If we have love we have God, and it is love (God) that conquers evil. Evil cannot exist in an "atmosphere" of true love (*agape*).

I. When Jesus gave us the "two commandments" - what was common to them? Love! Love God and love your neighbors! Tina Turner asked the question in one of her songs, "What's love got to do with it?" The answer to that question - in a biblical sense is this - "everything!" Love has everything to do with it! And, with a good understanding of scripture we realize that also means that God has everything to do with it!

J. The scripture passage told us that the people were amazed at the power of Jesus and at the authority he showed through his preaching, teaching, and healing. So, what did these "amazed people" do after they left the synagogue? They went out and told everyone what they had seen. They spread the fame of Jesus Christ. The news spread that day, and - thanks be to God - it is still spreading today, and God expects us to help with this "spreading!"

K. This lesson about fame and demons tells us one main thing: Jesus Christ has the power to change lives, and the good news is this - the demons are still running scared! Thanks be to God. Amen.