

“Casting in spirits” (31Jan21)  
Mark1:21-28; Deut18:15-20; 1Cor8

Demonic possession and exorcisms. Meat sacrificed to heathen deities. A great fiery death to prophets who speak falsely. Thrilling stuff in these readings.

You may wonder about the unclean spirit, how to think of that spiritual realm, if now we’d treat it with mental health professionals and medication.

Or I could ask after evils you’d like to cast out, and you could name plenty. What you’d have Jesus expel from your own life may not be as eagerly named aloud, though you know what haunts you, evil tendencies you feel infected by.

Amid these alluring angles, we’re told to focus on the voice of authority.

So maybe you listen for a voice of stirring inspiration, like the rich baritones and memorable allusions of Martin Luther King, of the sort to declare, “I refuse to accept that humankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright day break of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.”\*

Since our first reading has Moses instructing to listen for one who speaks like him, perhaps for a voice of authority we expect the majestic commanding sort that dialogued with God on a mountain as it smoked and thundered. If so, we should also remember that Moses was afflicted with a stutter and was no oratorical heavyweight champion.

Rather than the power of the voice, it could be the strength of the words, that they are full of wisdom. Mark reiterates teaching, using the word three times right on top of each other: Jesus taught—teaching—taught. We may expect spiritual enlightenment, but it’s quickly qualified by Paul’s speaking against sophistication. “Knowledge puffs up.” Being in the know is no solution, but actually may be the problem.

In being brief, I can’t explain resistance to the pagan god meat (especially if explanations are part of the obstacle). It’s not the same as whether it’s okay to taunt a vegetarian with bacon. Maybe it’s closer to trying to correct another’s faith, like if

somebody said God took a person’s life, then trying to argue a theological point you *think* would be helpful but ends up just undercutting or hurting them.

Paul says don’t do it. While you just want to be right, Christ died for that person. It’s less important to know than that you are known by God. More to the point: Paul declares himself and also Jesus on the side of the weak. The dummies. Those whose faith is tenuous, who really need help. Jesus does this so all of us can be in relationship with God and with each other, so we shouldn’t let other preferences and possibilities get in the way.

The same is in the Gospel reading. There’s an unclean spirit versus Jesus with the Holy Spirit. In that matchup, the authority of Jesus isn’t that he’s a really smart teacher, or has a captivating manner to make old Bible stories come to life. Really all it is is that he wants a person liberated, not cast out but free to rejoin his place in the community. That’s the strange new authority—not about who’s out but making sure he’s in. The Holy One of God does not deal in restrictive purity but in abundant inclusion, ensuring that all have their place, where no sin, sickness, stupidity, or stereotypes can get in the way.

With all of the details of amazing ministry in annual reports and congregational business, we remember today that being gathered under the authority of the one who makes a place for you is certainly a central definition of church.

In one aspect, I want to apologize: the pandemic threw off my rhythm, and I missed that today is Reconciling in Christ Sunday. We’ll celebrate more next week. For now, we give thanks for Christ’s work in the church in reconciling us to ensure that all have a place, including that message particularly for queer siblings who have been too long ostracized and cast out.

Be sure to notice the same for you, as well. Even if those inner demons haunt you. Even if your faith is weak. Even if you don’t really know where your place is, or are too sure of it. Even if you’re puffed up by your knowledge and certainties. Even if you’re too captive to the old authorities. God knows you. God’s goodness and love are for you.

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\* Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, in *A Testament of Hope*, p225-6