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January 28, 2018 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

**Text: Mark 1:21-28 (NIV)**

*Jesus Drives Out an Impure Spirit*

<sup>21</sup>They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. <sup>22</sup>The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. <sup>23</sup>Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, <sup>24</sup>“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!”

<sup>25</sup>“Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” <sup>26</sup>The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

<sup>27</sup>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 impure spirits and they obey him.”

<sup>28</sup>News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

I talked earlier about doing what we want with our bodies. How comfortable it feels to be able to say your body is your own. Sin has no problem whispering in your ear that you are in control. You can do what you want. You are your own man, your own woman. You are free of all constraints. You can go where you please and do what pleases you and no one can tell you otherwise.

It feels really good to be able to say that. “You can’t tell me what to do.” It puts all of the power in your hands. It means independence. It means freedom. It means deciding your own path and figuring out for yourself who you are going to be. No one can control you. It’s very liberating.

This same idea is the one that was percolating back in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Scholars and philosophers were pondering the nature of mankind. They looked at everything people are able to do. People are intelligent. They are able to solve complex problems and study the universe. They can make sense of the world around them.

If you are capable of doing all of this on your own, why do you need someone else to tell you what to do? You are able to make your own decision. You can figure out what’s best for you. It’s something you do all the time. You’re reading the labels on food when you’re at the grocery store, looking for healthy options. You’re looking through reviews of cars when you’re in the market for a new one, so you find one with good safety ratings, mileage, etc. You’re

talking with your financial advisor about retirement, savings, and all of those things you need to take care of yourself and your family. You're looking at all of the options for college to find the one that's right for you. You might ask for help, but you don't need someone to dictate everything to you, telling you what to do and when.

In ancient times, you had kings and emperors who ruled the land without question. They ruled by right of conquest or because they had the blessing of one god or another. To question their decrees was to invite disaster. Some countries had courts and judges or magistrates, but the king's word overruled everything and he could do so for any reason he wanted. He was the king.

The American Dream was founded on the idea, setting your own path, charting your own course. The early Americans didn't like the idea of someone dictating things to them. They wanted a say in their own futures. They didn't need a king on the other side of the ocean managing their affairs, especially without their consent.

It wasn't just a simple matter of taxes and other rules the colonists wanted to be free from. They wanted to entirely throw off the yoke of any foreign ruler. "Give me liberty, or give me death!" they declare. It would be better to be dead than to have anyone ruling over me. After all, who better to determine what is best for me than me?

You had theologians saying similar things back in Luther's day as well. Not so much that they were advocating throwing off all higher powers and authorities, but that you, as a good and reasonable human being, are capable of determining what you should do any how you should do it. You are able to see the right answer in a moral dilemma and follow through on it. You don't really need someone dictating your life to you. You can handle yourself quite well without all of that.

The story in Mark 1 for today seems pretty innocent. Jesus is teaching. Though it's early in his ministry, teaching is something Jesus likes to do very much. Many don't really understand what the messiah is all about and so he wants them to be able to grasp it for themselves. So Jesus is in the synagogue where the Jews will gather and there's a kind of Bible study time where one of the teachers will read a portion of Scripture and discuss it. Jesus is certainly happy to do this.

He gets interrupted though, because one of the men has a demon in him. The demon knows all about Jesus and cries out to him. Jesus casts the demon out and the man comes back to his senses.

All in all, this isn't really an out of the ordinary thing for Jesus. We see this kind of thing happening throughout Jesus' ministry. He teaches wherever he can. He casts out numerous demons. Jesus is constantly doing these things at every opportunity. So it's not strange at all for him to be teaching, even here at the beginning of his ministry.

No, it isn't unusual for Jesus to be teaching. What is unusual is for people to be taught by Jesus. The interesting thing here in this reading is how the people respond. They recognize there is something different about how Jesus does things. Jesus speaks with authority.

That doesn't make a whole lot of sense unless you understand how Jews did things. Scribes and priests are reading the text and offering thoughts on what things probably mean. Sometimes a notable rabbi would collect a bunch of his thoughts into a commentary that would become almost required reading for faithful Jews. Often those writings became even more popular than Scripture itself. Why read the Bible when you can read what Rabbi So-and-so said? He must know what he's talking about.

Jesus doesn't work like that though. He doesn't offer thoughts and suggestions, little pearls of wisdom to ponder, like Chicken Soup for the Soul. He speaks directly, without equivocation. He doesn't have to reconsider or back up and look at the passage from a different point of view. He doesn't have to wonder what God was trying to say with it. He knows because the words are his.

Jesus emphasizes this when he casts out the demon. How can Jesus order the demon to do anything? Because everything in creation was made by him and through him. He holds authority over everything.

That doesn't sit too well though. If Jesus can command demons and everything else in creation, then he can command you. But you don't need someone to tell you what to do. You manage yourself just fine. Why should anyone think they can handle your life better than you can? You're the one who does all of the hard work. You're the one who knows what's good for you and what isn't. Someone like that is just being nosy or bossy or controlling. Someone like that just thinks they're better than you, smarter, more capable. If someone is telling you what to do with your life they're saying you can't do it yourself. They're taking your authority over your own body and your life away from you.

We spend so much of our lives asserting authority over things. Our lives, our relationships, our aspirations and all of the things that relate to us. We control them and regulate

them. We manage who can know them or be a part of them and who can't. Any amount of control we have over something is guarded zealously. Anything of value is something we want control of, because then we can use it how we want and no one can take it away from us. Giving up our authority over something of value means someone can take that valued thing from us, stop us from having it or destroy it altogether. It means someone has power over us.

The first sin of Adam and Eve was to try and be like God, to take control, to assume authority over their lives and what they could or couldn't do. Their sin also taught them an important lesson. Assuming you have authority over something doesn't mean you actually have authority over it.

Every sin we commit is proof we don't have control at all. Sin directs our every thought and action. Everything we do is in service to sin. Our inability to let go of the control we think we have shows how we can't even manage ourselves, not even over little, inconsequential things. We are addicted to that sense of control and become slaves to it.

Jesus comes along and declares to us what God says, without any hesitation or confusion. He tells us that we are slaves. Any authority we think we have is an illusion because nothing in this world has to obey us if it doesn't want to. We can't control our lives, our bodies, or the world around us. Jesus comes along and casts out a demon with a word. He tells us, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He tells us the question is never about what we are control of, but rather who is in control of us. Do we choose to be under the authority of sin or do we step back and acknowledge Christ as the only one with authority?

Christ comes to earth to live out our life. He shows what happens to those who try and take authority for themselves. He shows how powerless we all are. He lives like us, as one with no authority and shows we can't control anything at all. Sin drives us straight into the grave and we can't do anything about it.

Jesus demonstrates his authority and power as God and king over all creation. Allowing someone else to be in control sounds frightening to us. He shows us there is nothing to be afraid of, because everything he does is for our good. He is not a slave to sin and that means he is able to do what we could never do. He goes to the cross to show where our lives lead when ruled by sin. He steps out of the grave to show us where we will when he is leading us. He shows his authority over even sin and death. He has the authority to put our sin away so it no longer rules us and so death cannot control us.

It's ironic that the point when Adam and Eve sought to take control for themselves is the exact point they lost control over everything. God had bestowed his authority over creation to them. They were in charge of the world and everything that lived in it, with the one exception being the fruit of the tree. The plants and animals of the world would listen to them and were happy to be led by God's caretakers. But now that is all gone and even death has come into our life.

Jesus tells the disciples before he ascends into heaven, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus is king of creation, and by relinquishing our imaginary hold on our lives and letting him take charge, we gain back everything we had lost. Jesus grants authority back to us. We get our lives, our bodies, and our minds back, because death no longer has a hold on us and sin no longer controls us. He gives us the authority to go and do his work, and to look forward to the day when he restores all creation, and live in the world as we were meant to.

Luther says in the Creed that Jesus freed us from sin, death, and the power of the devil, "that I may be his own and live under him in his kingdom. And serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity."

Take comfort in Christ and in his reign. Rejoice that he rules over you with authority, because under him you will live as you were always meant to, and live in peace and joy forevermore.