

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Mark’s Jesus, recently baptized and fresh from his confrontation with Satan in the wilderness has been preaching the reign of God since John the Baptizer’s arrest. And now it is time for his public ministry to begin. That ministry begins in Mark with this, the story of Jesus’ first miracle: Jesus is teaching in synagogue when an unclean spirit confronts him. Jesus promptly casts the spirit out and the crowd is amazed.

A response of astonishment and amazement is standard in any miracle story, but here the surprise is not about the healing of the man with the unclean spirit. Middle Eastern people of the ancient world, and in many cultures still today, experience a world filled with spirits both good and bad. Our ancestors in the faith understood these spirits to be more powerful than humans but less powerful than God. And while I am skeptical about the existence of literal demons, I find a certain wisdom in the ancient recognition that we can occasionally be caught up in forces that are not genuinely who we are, but that are so powerful and compelling that they *seem* to possess us.

Now the word "possess" is not actually used to describe the man in this story, but I find it interesting that in the verse where Jesus entered the synagogue, the Greek word translated as “entered” can also be used to describe the way a spirit enters a person. In the next verse that tells how Jesus taught as one having authority, the Greek can also be understood to imply that Jesus was *possessed* by authority.

The question of where this authority came from is what had the people of Capernaum mystified. The authority that this Nazarene craftsman conveyed in his teaching was well beyond their expectations. The content of his teaching was likely some version of what Jesus had been preaching since John’s arrest: “The

time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near.” But here in the synagogue, the primary teaching institution for first century Jews, Jesus taught with *personal* authority, not like the scribes. The scribes—the teachers of Torah—tended to rely on *referred* authority. They used phrases like: “there is a teaching that says...” or “as Hillel the Elder has stated...” Or they used a technique called *remez* or “hint,” in which they quoted part of a Scripture passage assuming that the listener’s knowledge of scripture would allow them to work out a fuller or deeper meaning. Jesus also used some of these methods.

But here in Capernaum, what amazed the crowds is that Jesus taught with *s’mikhah*. In English, *s’mikhah* means “fill their hands” and it refers to the passing of one person’s authority to another by the laying on of hands. But *s’mikhah* is not *just* passing on authority – there is a deep symbolism behind it. The Mishnah and Torah show that *s’mikhah* originated with the sacrifices at the Temple. The ritual required that the person making the sacrifice lay hands on the animal being sacrificed.

The idea was that you were passing something of yourself into the animal so as to experience your own death upon the altar. *S’mikhah* therefore is not just merely passing of authority into a person, but rather passing some part of yourself—entering into them so that when they speak it is not only they who speak, but it is the person who gave them that *s’mikhah*. Consequently, each person who received authority from Joshua and who passed it on down a chain of succession passed on a link to Moses at Mt. Sinai.

What amazed the people at Capernaum is that Jesus spoke with authority, with *s’mikhah* that came not from humans, but directly from God. And he punctuated this authority by casting out an unclean spirit—by re-enacting his battle with Satan in the desert—a battle of cosmic proportions played out within the human heart in the midst of a human community. That is the miracle.

God is not only making all things new in heaven and on earth, but first and foremost is making all things new in the landscape of the human mind, heart and spirit. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” is answered if we will loosen our grip on what we know to be so and open our minds, hearts and spirits to what God is teaching us now. There is no need to abandon what we were taught, but God can update our understanding only if we are constantly turning toward Christ. When we are in the grip of our own demons it can be especially difficult to be open and available to new teachings. But when we are liberated from that grip, what results is amazing.

Several years ago, I was advising a man who told me this story about a release from a sort of captivity. “I was raised a good Southern Baptist,” he told me, “but we became Episcopalians after we got married. My folks and my church had taught me that homosexuality was a sin, and I never really gave any of it much reflection, I guess,” he said, “because I’m not gay and none of my friends growing up were, or at least if they were, I didn’t know it. Preachers told me that God didn’t love gay people and that the bible said so, and I never questioned it. Later on, folks told me we should ‘love the sinner and hate the sin,’ which still doesn’t make any sense to me—seems like a slippery way of getting away with hating something about someone else—but I still didn’t question it because it just wasn’t part of my life.”

Not a part of his life, that is, until the day that he was driving his oldest son off to his first year of college. “As we were driving, Karl just got quieter and quieter and quieter. And then he started to cry, so I pulled over. That’s when he told me that he was gay. I was shocked and felt like I had absolutely nothing to say.”

And that’s when this man let go of a powerful set of unquestioned teaching. “All I knew,” he told me, “was that I loved my son with everything in me. And if I felt that way, how could God feel any different? I decided that

everything that I had been taught was wrong and that I just wanted to support my son. And that's about all I could think of to tell Karl at the time." Now, several years later, he has a whole new way of engaging what scripture does and doesn't say. He and his family have found a new church where love is taught, and they have a beautiful and strong relationship with a son who is thriving.

I could tell you similar stories about people who had been taught that black people have no souls, but who let Christ cleanse them and teach them to love their black brothers and sisters instead. I could tell you about a man who carried hate in his heart for the Japanese who bombed Pearl Harbor, killing his brother, until he let Christ cleanse him and teach him to love instead. Stories about people filled with self-loathing or who identified themselves as helpless victims or who carried grudges until they let Christ cleanse them and teach them to love instead. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

"We learn through pain," writes Annie Lamott, "that some of the things we thought were castles turn out to be prisons, and we desperately want out, but even though we built them we can't find the door. Yet maybe if you ask God for help in knowing which way to face, you'll have a moment of intuition. Maybe you'll see at least one right step you can take."¹

In a few weeks, we will enter Lent, our season of preparation for the renewal of our baptismal vows. The preparation involves more than a one-time, abrupt turning away from a former life to a life of grace, but on-going, even daily, practices of turning to the authority of Christ. The intent is to continually attune all aspects of our created being – body, mind and soul – to one purpose: "to cherish Christ above all." This aim would not be possible if Christ's love, grace and example had not first been given to us. The spiritual life, while relying on grace, is something to be worked at with discipline and mindfulness and not something simply to be hoped for.

¹ Lamott, Anne. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.

The purpose of continually turning to God is not self-salvation, neither is it to make life rigid or other-worldly or self-righteous. The purpose of continually turning to God is to acknowledge the authority, the *s'mikhah*, of the one who frees us, who liberates us, who makes life significant, sacred and full of meaning. In the Easter season, we may be more attuned to the power of the resurrection breaking through in our lives, but even today we can attend to the mystery moment-by-moment—the little deaths of judgmental perspectives that bind us, of prejudices that separate us, of self-talk that limits us. The rebirth of fresh, life-giving perspectives, more inclusive love, patience, generosity. These are the evidence of the power of God at work in the kingdom impinging on our world to make all aspects of our lives whole moment by moment, increment by increment: the sometimes smooth and sometimes jagged transformation of our spirits as they are entered and possessed by the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Maybe the first step is simply to ask the Risen Christ, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” and expect a miracle.