

IT'S NOT A FAIR FIGHT

Mark 1:21-28

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (Series B)

January 28, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 1, verses 21 through 28. It is on page 707 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus demonstrates his authority over the forces of evil. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Mark 1, beginning at verse 21, we read in Jesus' name.

²¹ And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴ "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." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have enemies. Our enemies are real, they are dangerous, and they are too much for us. It's not a fair fight. That, perhaps, is not what you want to hear, or even what you expect to hear, when you come to church. It's not very uplifting. There's no "you can do it" message here. Our enemies are too strong for us. We're in trouble. This, by the way, is not what you want to say before you lead your troops into battle or your team into a basketball game. You want them to believe they have a fighting chance. But we don't have a fighting chance. Our enemies are simply too strong for us. It's not a fair fight.

Our enemies are not flesh and blood (Eph. 6:12). If they were, we might have a chance. But they're not, and we don't. Our enemies are not flesh and blood. So we're not talking about some people who want to come and beat us up and steal our lunch money. Even if there were such people, they would not be our enemies. The Bible talks about different kinds of enemies. As we look at Scripture, there are three basic enemies that keep coming up. They are sin, death, and the devil.

Chief among them is the devil, because he caused the other two to come into existence. Death came into existence because of sin (Rom. 5:12), and the devil tempted our first parents to commit the original sin (Gen. 3:4-7). But we can't use "The devil made me do it" as an excuse. Eve already tried that (Gen. 3:13). It didn't work. But the devil did inspire sin, and sin

resulted in death. So we have these three enemies—sin, death, and the devil—and chief among them is the devil.

So the enemy we'll be considering this morning is the devil. In the gospel lesson we see a confrontation between Jesus and one of the devil's demons, who is referred to in this text as "an unclean spirit."

I remember another pastor once saying that one of the ways to tell the difference between a good preacher and a bad preacher is by how much he talks about the devil. So, naturally, I asked myself how much I talk about the devil. And it got me thinking about how much we should talk about and think about the devil.

If a preacher doesn't say anything about the devil, that's a problem, because Scripture has plenty to say about him. We don't see the devil at the very beginning and very end of the Bible, but he's very close. We find him close to the beginning in Genesis 3. And we find him close to the end in Revelation 20. He also appears several places in between. This fact should teach us that the devil is one of the significant supporting actors in the story of the Bible. He might actually be the fourth most significant person in the Bible, behind the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So it would certainly be an error to ignore the devil altogether. He's real, he's powerful, and he's mean.

An old French poet once said, "The finest trick of the devil is to persuade you that he does not exist" (Charles Baudelaire). He's not quite right. The devil's finest trick was convincing Adam and Eve that something evil was really good. But the old French guy had a point. If you don't believe your enemy is real, then your enemy can do whatever he wants to you, just so long as he's sneaky about it. The devil is real, and he is stronger than you and me. Underestimating him could be a fatal error.

But we can also err in the other direction. Overestimating the devil can be an equally serious error. He is stronger than us, but he's not God, and he is not *a* god. He has angelic power, because he used to be an angel, but he does not have divine power. He does not have the same powers as God, and he cannot do the same things. We tend to think of opposite forces as being equal—kind of like a yin and yang thing or a balance in the Force. But the devil's power is not equal to God's power. It's not even in the same category.

God is all-powerful. The theological word for this is "omnipotent." The devil is not omnipotent. There are plenty of things he cannot do.

God is all-knowing. The theological word for this is "omniscient." The devil is not omniscient. There are plenty of things he doesn't know. Your Father in heaven knows the hairs on your head (Matt. 10:30). The devil probably doesn't.

God is present everywhere. The theological word for this is "omnipresent." The devil is not omnipresent. My guess—and this is just my guess; I'm not sure how to prove it—is that the devil can only be in one place at a time. He's not an evil god. He's simply a fallen angel. We should not underestimate him, but we should also not overestimate him.

So the devil is not all-powerful, he doesn't know everything, and he can't be everywhere at the same time. I'm not even sure the devil knows who we are. Certainly, he must know some people by name, but we have no reason to think he has personal knowledge of everyone. He's not omniscient, and he's not God.

Sometimes you hear people talking about how the devil has really been attacking them lately. I'm not sure how you can even know that. I remember visiting a church once where the

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pastor couldn't get his PowerPoint to work. He blamed it on the devil. I thought divine intervention was more likely. Let's not give the devil too much credit, okay? And let's not give ourselves too much credit either. Do we really think we are important enough to draw the devil's personal attention? Somewhere, someone is probably being attacked personally by the devil, but it's highly unlikely that any of us are important enough to become the devil's personal project. It's far more likely that one of the devil's demons might tempt us.

We can think of the devil as the CEO of evil. The CEO of a company doesn't know everything his company is doing. But he does have authority over all of it, and his direction is passed down to the rest of it. So the devil's angels—also called “demons”—are doing the devil's work, even if the devil isn't in all the details of it. So we are right to call the devil our enemy, even if we're not sure he has direct contact with any of us. He is still our enemy.

So there is probably a demon who knows your name and tries to tempt you. This should not be taken lightly. They are more powerful than we are. In at least some cases, they are even capable of possessing a person. But there are limits to their power. First, as far as we can tell from Scripture, the demons seem to be outnumbered by good angels two to one (Rev. 12:4; cf., Rev. 1:20; 9:1; Judges 5:20; Is. 14:12). Second, as we noted regarding their CEO, the demons are not all-powerful, they are not all-knowing, and they are not present everywhere. They tempt us to sin. They can even possess a person. They are powerful. We cannot take them on and win. But they are not gods, and they do not have God's power. And third, as we see in the gospel lesson, they are subject to the Word of God.

In this gospel lesson, Jesus reveals his authority. Before the demon even starts acting up, the people in the synagogue notice that Jesus teaches with authority. They don't see his authority in action right away, but they notice from his method of teaching that he presumes to have a certain authority that other rabbis did not claim for themselves.

This probably doesn't have anything to do with their ability to hold an audience or persuade them of their opinions. The people in the synagogue may not have even believed what Jesus was saying, but they recognized that he claimed a certain authority for himself.

Let me explain. It was common practice for the rabbis to quote previous rabbis. When they interpreted the Scriptures for the people, they didn't come right out and say, “This is what it means.” Instead they said, “This is what rabbi so-and-so says.” They appealed to an oral tradition that was supposedly passed down from Moses. But Jesus never appeals to old, dead rabbis. Instead of saying, “According to rabbi so-and-so ...,” he says stuff like, “**You have heard that it was said ..., but I say to you ...**” (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). He doesn't quote the rabbis. He quotes Scripture. He even quotes Scripture against the devil's temptations. But he doesn't quote the rabbis. So Jesus is the only rabbi these people know who doesn't quote other rabbis. He acts like he has the authority to interpret and teach Scripture without anyone else's approval.

So the people saw what Jesus was doing, and they were astonished. They may or may not have believed what Jesus said, but they were astonished at his method of teaching.

But then something happened to prove that Jesus really does have the authority he presumed to have. An unclean spirit starts talking through a man he possessed.

And it's interesting, the unclean spirit actually speaks the truth. He says, “I know who you are—the Holy One of God” (1:24). And then Jesus shuts him down. This proves Jesus' authority

to the people in the synagogue. “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him” (1:27).

Now this conversation is rather interesting. The demon actually speaks truth. He correctly identifies Jesus as “the Holy One of God.” The demon knows exactly who Jesus is. One of the things we see from this is that faith is not the mere knowledge of facts. As James teaches, “Even the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19). Faith is not the mere knowledge of facts. Rather, faith is a trust in who this Jesus is and what he has done for you. The unclean spirit certainly did not trust in Jesus. Instead, he was afraid.

What’s surprising, though, is that, not only does the demon know who Jesus is, but he preaches it. This doesn’t sound like something Satan and his demons would want people to know. The devil does *not* want you to believe in Jesus.

So this is the really curious thing in the text. The demon wants everyone to know who Jesus is, and Jesus apparently doesn’t. This is one of those questions that we probably don’t have a definitive answer for. But the best explanation is that Jesus wants to avoid false expectations of the Messiah. It was a common expectation of the Jews that the Messiah would establish a political kingdom, but Jesus had no intention of ever doing this. He came for a different reason. He came to establish his kingdom on a cross. So if the people catch on too quickly to Jesus’ true identity, they will be disenfranchised when he doesn’t assume the throne. Jesus would rather reveal himself slowly over time. Instead of coming right out and saying it, he hints at it, so that the people learn his character and his mission by what he actually teaches and does, rather than project their false expectations on him. So during the first part of Jesus’ ministry, whenever people or demons figure out who Jesus really is, he continually commands them not to say anything about it. There will be more demons, and Jesus will not permit them to speak either (1:34).

So it seems like both Jesus and the demon realize that it would be harmful for the people to know who Jesus is. That’s why the demon speaks, and that’s why Jesus shuts him up.

Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit, saying, “**Be silent, and come out of him!**” (1:25), and the unclean spirit obeys (1:26).

The people are amazed when they see Jesus’ authority in action. He had been speaking as if he has authority, and now he proves it.

And we see the power of Jesus’ word in this. Even the demons obey him. And what’s really impressive is that the demons don’t obey him willingly. The unclean spirit tries to resist, but he is bound by Jesus’ Word. Notice what happens after Jesus speaks. The spirit convulses the man and cries out with a loud voice. Then he came out of the man. It’s not like the demon is willingly obedient to Jesus’ authority. It’s not like spirit recognizes Jesus’ authority and decides to give up. He doesn’t go quietly. He puts up a fight. That’s what the convulsing and crying out indicates. The spirit tries to resist Jesus’ Word, but the Word of Jesus overpowers the demon and drives him out.

Think of a police officer who catches a criminal in the act. The officer says, “Put down the weapon!” Now the criminal has a choice to make. Hopefully he realizes that the jig is up and yields to the officer’s authority. But the criminal is not physically constrained by the officer’s words. The words merely inform the criminal what should be done. His body can disobey if he wants. But imagine if the officer’s words have the power to physically constrain the criminal against his will. The officer speaks, and the criminal looks and sees his hand going down. He’s

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putting the weapon down against his will. The criminal tries to stop it, but he can't. He shakes, and he tries to grab his arm with the other arm, and he's yelling at the police officer. But he physically cannot stop himself from obeying the officer's command. That would be an impressive police officer.

I don't know of any officers who can do that, but Jesus can. His Word has the power to dictate reality in both the physical and the spiritual realm. We see this as the unclean spirit puts up a fight, but is overpowered by the mere words of Jesus. We saw the same power on display when God said, "Let there be ..." (Gen. 1:3, etc.), and there was. We see the same power again when Jesus says to a paralytic, "Rise, pick up your bed, and go home" (2:11), or when he says to a dead girl, "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (5:41). Talk about teaching with authority. Jesus' words actually create reality.

If demons and all of creation are constrained when Jesus speaks, what do you think happens when Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven" (2:5)? And what do you think happens when Jesus goes to the cross and sheds his blood for those sins? Do you think your sins can stand up to his authority? And what's going to happen when Jesus returns and calls you out of your grave? Will your bones be the first to resist the authority of his Word? No. Demons and all of creation are constrained at the sound of his voice. The devil and all the hosts of hell could attack you in an instant, but if Jesus says, "Stop," they will be bound by that one word. The Word of Jesus will be an impenetrable wall around you. "No evil shall be allowed to befall you" (Ps. 91:10).

Dear saints, we have enemies. And the forces of evil are stronger than us. We are no match for them. But the good news is, it's not a fair fight, because your King fights for you. So fear not; your enemies are no match for him and his powerful Word. Sin, death, and the devil are constrained by the sound of his voice. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.