“What is this to you and to me?”

Mark 1:21-28

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For those of us who do public presentations, interruptions are not good. We plan out our speeches, or our sermons or our lesson plans. Things are supposed to go a certain way. We practiced our presentations, have an outline or manuscript. Maybe we have it memorized. We have exactly the way it is supposed to go in our mind. Generally, I have a good idea of what is going to happen when I stand at this podium every Sunday. I will look out at you all and begin preaching. Sometimes little crazy things will happen. I can expect on of my girls to shout a little bit. Maybe a phone will go off, like a few weeks ago when I heard a George Strait song coming from somebody’s phone. It made me want to sing along. Or two weeks ago when there was a large bang from upstairs, but it happened to be Darren tripping over a toy in the nursery. I didn’t quite see what was going on, but saw him give a thumbs-up so on we went. I haven’t had any major worship disruptions so far, but I am sure it might happen.

One major worship disruption that I remember was when we were visiting one Sunday at First Presbyterian of Franklin, TN which is outside Nashville. It was your typical Presbyterian worship service. They had a tradition of standing for the gospel reading before the sermon. So everybody stood up for the Palm Sunday story from Luke. About halfway through the passage there was this loud bang. Everyone kind of looked around and there was an elderly lady who had passed out. The pastor stopped immediately in his reading and said, “I need medical professionals to attend to so and so, one of you elders to call 911 and everyone else please calmly move to the fellowship hall.” I remember being completely amazed by this pastor’s command and authority. It was a great learning moment for me as I was in my first year of seminary at the time. Now I would have an idea of what to do if something happened like that in a future church I would serve. The woman eventually was seen by EMTs and she told them to let her stay, she wanted to finish worship. We were eventually called back into the sanctuary. We had a probably 15-minute break while this was going on. We got back in and instead of preaching he proclaimed something about the good news that would come on the next Sunday of Easter. Even when he didn’t preach a regular sermon, the sermon of his actions will always be with me.

That is how it seems to be with our passage from Mark today. Jesus had just got done quickly calling his new disciples James, John, Simon Peter and Andrew. They headed off to Capernaum a village on the northern edge of the Lake. This becomes Jesus’ base of activity in Galilee. We don’t know exactly what the synagogue that he was in looked like. Perhaps it had a little bit of a pulpit for him to stand behind. This was Jesus’ first real public appearance. Sure, he went to get baptized in the Jordan by John but he never said anything. He then called the disciples but it was just in front of them. This is his first time in front of a reasonable crowd. We can assume that he is trying to make a big impression. That he was. He began his teaching and all were astounded. He taught them as one having authority and not like the scribes. We need to be careful here. This can be where many sermons can go wrong. When talking about ancient Jewish life, we can enter into some subtle Anti-Semitism. We of course want to be gracious to religions that are different than our own. But when we go around bashing the scribes or the Pharisees, we are also bashing their religion. The scribes have been working to pass down Jewish tradition. Jesus is merely doing something new and different. Don’t need to bash the scribes. Jesus here is effective in his new message because he is rooted in the old things. Rooted in scripture and tradition. But he is teaching the people in a new way. He is in front of the exact crowd you would think. A crowd of faithful Jews that would be receptive to his teaching.

Just as Jesus is on a roll and amazing everyone, someone cries out. Did he hear the voice right away? When you are in the middle of a presentation or a sermon, you want to keep going. You might hear a little noise and not really think anything of it. Maybe it was actually a lot louder and distracting than you perceive it. An unclean spirit we would think would be nowhere near a holy synagogue. Throughout Mark Jesus encounters unclean spirits and demons. Demons we think of today are cartoonish sorts of characters. Think of Scooby Doo or other cartoons that talk about demons. Demons were living entities in the time of Jesus that afflicted human beings. Today we think about clean and unclean in different ways. Generally it is about hygiene. Restaurants have to pass county health screenings. We have to be properly groomed and clean to interact in society. Those who don’t do that can come under much scorn. Scholar Paula Fredricksen notes how cleanliness was thought about in ancient Israel. Unclean does not mean sinful. Given the regular state of daily affairs most people would have been ritually unclean. Unclean would be just going through the activities of daily life such as giving birth and burying the dead. Some things that we might still consider “unclean” today.

This distinction is crucial. Jews may become unclean in another way. If you have ever been to a synagogue you may notice that the Torah scrolls are carried by people who wear gloves. Or at least they use their prayer shawls to touch it. When the scroll is opened to be read, the reader will follow the words, not with her finger but with a pointer. This makes sense when you realize that the scrolls are old and fragile. Jews do not touch the scroll says Jacob Neusner because the scrolls render the hands unclean. How strange. How can scripture make one sinful? If we think of uncleanliness as the contact with something mysteriously powerful than it makes sense. There is a mystery in scripture so powerful that even Rabbis understand that even God was bound by Torah when creating the world.

Our unclean spirit in the temple is powerful and mysterious. The unclean spirit stands apart from the human characters in the story. The spirit stands above them toying with them as he pleases. The spirit knows who Jesus is, has this knowledge that is only available to God and Jesus. The spirit cries out,” 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.” Was this a booming voice or just a small disturbance. Jesus wanted to keep on with his teaching. He eventually hears this voice and rebukes him, “Be silent, and come out of him!” It takes awhile for the demon to come out. The convulsing starts and there is a loud scream in the synagogue. This must have been quite the sight to see. Were people running for the doors? Or were they rapt with anticipation as to what would happen. Frozen to their seats while watching this mystery. People were amazed and kept asking each other what this was. Our NRSV bible translates it as kept on asking one another. This choice shows that people were impressed with Jesus’ first public appearance. Other places in Mark translate it as argued or dispute. So, was it favorable or did it provoke an argument? Both answers are possible and it changes the scene. “What is this? A new teaching---with authority! He commands the unclean spirits and they obey him.” His fame spread like wildfire throughout the region.

So what is this? What does this mean? Jesus’ first public appearance is probably not what he expected. He was just there to teach and he was interrupted. This “unclean spirit” came in and interrupted everything. Perhaps like me today, he just wanted to make the scholarly argument and ignore the “unclean spirit”. Because those things are not easily explained. They never are. When we hear of someone who is healed by no scientific reason we think that it is utter nonsense. Not something that we heady Presbyterians can explain.

There was this old world war II movie where an English officer and a German officer find themselves trapped together in a tough battle. They had both found themselves in this old farmhouse. Their units were scattered and the outcome of the battle was uncertain. They tried to kill each other at first but came to a standoff. They watched each other and talked. The talking was initially each one of them trying to find an opening. But exhaustion wore them down. They couldn’t relax but they were worn down. So the talking came to subjects of family, music, art, good food and wine.

One officer finally asks the question that has been lingering. Maybe the battle is over, maybe not. Their time together made it know how much they have in common. So he asks, “What’s all this to you and to me?” It seeks to establish common ground raised above the brutality outside. The German answers, “Politicians start the wars, the animals outside will fight them because they’d fight and kill in any case, and this gives them a sense of being worthwhile and valuable, part of a cause. But when it’s over, you and I will be asked to put the world back together again. And we will do it because it’s what we always do. But what’s all this brutality to you and to me?”

What is this to you and to me? This new teaching? What are we supposed to do with it? We want concrete answers. We were hoping for more but got interrupted by this unclean spirit. I think that is something that we should pay attention to. We are all trying to go about our lives trying to do something big. Work our jobs to the best of our abilities. Raising our families to the best of our ability. But we get interrupted. Someone comes up and asks us for help. Someone asks us to join a group working on an issue. It could be a lot of things. Stop interrupting me.

In that interruption is where the mystery is. Because of this interruption, Jesus was able to show the ultimate mystery of his work. We will go on to see throughout the gospels that Jesus will offer some concrete examples. Love your neighbor as yourself. Do this in remembrance of me. Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone. But he will also go on healing people. He will cast out demons. It will make no sense. Why did he heal that guy but not my friend? Where is my piece of this healing?

We will continue to be interrupted by unclean spirits. Such as poverty or the opioid epidemic. Will we call it out? Will we say, Be silent, and come out! Can we call out those unclean spirits? We will just want to keep on going with our lives. Doing our work quietly and keep our heads down. Sometimes we will need to call out that evil in our midst with a loud voice. As a church I believe this is what we are called to do. For we work through the one who has the highest authority. The one who even unclean spirits admit is the Holy One of God. So let us speak with that voice. Be Silent and Come out. Then all will know what this is to you and to me. Amen.