

Let us pray: Loving Creator, you have given us understanding so that we might come to know you as the One by whom we have been given life. By your grace, help us to share your wondrous love for all humanity, with everyone our lives touch, so that they too might come to know you as the Divine One, Creator of all created order. Amen

I remember as a young adolescent being instructed in the proper way to greet another human being. You know what I mean – the proper way to be introduced, how to greet someone older, or a child for that matter. What I means is this - How to introduce yourself to someone you are meeting for the first time. And how not to put a child in a position which would be demeaning or condescending. Come to think about it, how we meet someone should be the same for anyone we meet, not just with children. We should greet everyone with respect.

For many of us, we share in the same ritual when being introduced to someone new, through learning and repeating their name. Knowing someone's name allows us to place an identifying label on their person. When we have knowledge of someone's name, we are then able to call them by that name, thereby giving us a sense of having respect, and authority in speaking their name. And, for some people, calling someone by name is a way of showing their superiority and power over that person. And that, may or may not be a good thing.

The gospel story for today contains multiple examples of “authority taking” by various people. The gospel begins with Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. The synagogue was the place where the scribes could be found teaching about the Law or the Prophets and expounding about the importance of the Law and the Prophets found in the Hebrew texts, to the people living in first century Palestine. The

scribes quoted from the teachings of the rabbis, and they believed that they spoke with authority when they were instructing the people. The writer of the gospel attributed to Mark views the scribes' teachings as being oppressive and designed not to liberate the people, but rather to hold them down. Jesus' manner of teaching was completely the opposite to that of the scribes. Jesus spoke with authority which came from God. Jesus' authority gave the people a sense of hope in the Law and the Prophets, a sense of liberation, and not oppression. So, who was this Jesus?

Jesus was a compelling and charismatic figure. His presence was magnetic. His way was intriguing to anyone who encountered him in public. He spoke with authority, he spoke with a wisdom beyond his years, because he was possessed by God. People could not ignore him. In fact, scripture tells us that people were mesmerized by his presence. People responded to him with awe because they were amazed at his connection to the God, they themselves wanted to come to know.

But at the same time, the unholy presence in that place also responded to Jesus. This unholy presence was afraid and panicked because they knew God, as Creator and Lord. Some in the crowd that followed Jesus did not like his manner of speaking, and worse than that, the way in which he was so quickly becoming the centre attraction, wherever he went. These were the persons who knew they had to lose should Jesus rise to be more than an itinerate preacher.

As he teaches, a voice comes from among those gathered to hear him. It is an angry voice calling out against his presence. From Mark chapter one, verse 24 we read, "and he cried 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.” “Holy One of God”, that is a messianic title, a label which identifies Jesus as belonging to God, of being pure and holy, and separated from all that is impure. Isn’t this the way we see Jesus?

The unclean spirit in this situation is trying to take authority over Jesus. Upon hearing a voice coming from out of the crowd, a voice calling out in anger against him, Jesus quickly responds. With authority and directedness, Jesus calls out the evil inhabiting this person. Jesus commands the unclean spirit to “be silent, and to come out of him.” Jesus takes authority over this unclean spirit.

Jesus himself knows what it is to be possessed by a spirit, yet in His case, it is the Holy Spirit that possesses the spirit of the Son of God. When Jesus was baptized by John in the river Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and drove him out into the wilderness where, as I said in my sermon last week, Jesus discovers what it is that God has planned for his life, from this point onwards. Jesus was indeed possessed by the Holy Spirit, and not an evil spirit like the spirit that possesses the person who confronts Jesus on this day. And now, when Jesus commands the unclean spirit to leave this man, it is with the authority given to him through his divine connection to God, that he goes about demanding that the unclean spirit depart from this man. When the unclean spirit leaves the man, there is space opened within the man’s existence, so that he may be possessed by the Spirit of God.

When Jesus commands the unclean spirit to be silent, the spirit is prevented from naming Jesus. Thus, the evil spirit does not have

opportunity to take authority over Jesus, because it is not able to call Jesus, by name.

The crowds are in awe of what has happened. They watch Jesus act with complete command over the situation. They watch as Jesus exercises his authority before their eyes. The authority of God over the forces of evil are manifest when the evil spirit is driven out from this man, by Jesus of Nazareth.

Last week, we read the passage from Mark 1, verse 15 in which Jesus proclaimed that “the time is fulfilled, and “the kingdom of God has come near”. Today’s gospel reading tells us that God has now set about defeating the forces of evil in this world. And that Satan’s rule over this world is about to end.

Yet, the evil of this world is still with us. We see it in the injustice and inequity of our systems of government, economics, and social equality. We see it in the systemic racism which grips our world. We see it in our fascination with greed and the drive within us to be the richest, to have the best, and to be first in line to receive what is being given no matter how many are in greater need than ourselves. It is our responsibility as Christians, along with all the other faith groups who are working for good in this time, to name the evil before us. Unless we name this evil, it will name us, and we will find ourselves under its control, under its authority, and eventually it may destroy us.

It takes courage to step out and to name those things which are evil, and those things which are opposed to the Will of our Creator. Speaking out may make us unpopular, but that is the cost of discipleship. It is the cost of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

As people of God, we have opportunity to reach out to our God in prayer. Through prayer, we have the confidence to resist the despair that can grip us in times of need. Through prayer we seek the grace of God so that we may have the patience to wait for change to happen, for the gift of being free to be ourselves, for the time when we can all live in harmony. It is a difficult road, but we travel it together. So, even in this time of world insecurity and evil, please don't despair.

God has authority over all that is evil in this world. As scripture tells us, the kingdom of God is near. In fact, it is here among us right now. All we need to do is be kind to ourselves and others, to be calm, and to stay safe. There is the light at the end of the tunnel, and all will be well, because God is in us and beside us through all the world can throw our way.

Amen