

Jesus' Alternative Wisdom

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Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28
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When we have been talking about following Jesus, here at Lewinsville, one of the ways that we have talked about that is that Jesus leads us on an alternative path to the dominant ways of our society and our world. It is a way of mercy, rather than vengeance; a way of truth, rather than manipulation; a way of love, rather than of coercive force. I love our gospel story from Mark 1 that Karen just read for us, because of what it teaches us about Jesus' alternative path of wisdom. One of the exercises we were doing a bit of in our Wednesday Bible study this past week was to ask ourselves, "If this text were the only story we had about Jesus, what would it teach us about him? What would you learn about Jesus from this story?" In this story, set very early in Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark, he goes to the synagogue on the sabbath, as a faithful Jew, to share a teaching. While he is teaching, we are told that a man with what is called an "unclean spirit" cries out and begins making a loud noise. I imagine this man standing up in the middle of the synagogue, pointing an accusatory finger at Jesus, and creating a scene.

What the story tells us is that Jesus moves towards the man with the unclean spirit. He sees the humanity of this disruptive individual and moves towards him, not to accommodate or even to soothe the unclean spirit, but in order to heal the man. The unclean spirit needs to be *removed*, but the man with the unclean spirit needs to be *healed*.

This sort of *spiritual surgery* is so difficult to do. When we encounter what the New Testament calls an "unclean spirit" or a "demon" in someone, when someone is becoming very disruptive and causing quite a lot of trouble, it is far more common for us to want to remove or get rid of or excommunicate the person, in order to get rid of the unclean spirit. We too often, I think, tend to be willing to throw out the person with the unclean spirit, the "baby with the bath water," if you will. And when it happens that *we* are the ones who have an unclean spirit of some kind – which can be so much harder for us to see, as Jesus says in Matthew 7, the log in our own eye, rather than the speck in someone else's – when we have an unclean spirit of some kind, when we become conscious of the way that we are grappling with an substance addiction, or an irrational fear of conflict or disapproval, when we are addicted to our own status or respect, when we are blinded by our own ideological beliefs – what this story is teaching us is that Jesus is not looking to punish us for

having an unclean spirit, for being possessed by something other than his grace and his mercy and his purpose.

He's looking to heal us.

Jesus is not afraid of the unclean spirit. In fact, you get the rather clear sense that Jesus has seen this kind of thing before. So whatever you are facing in your life, whether it is an "unclean spirit" of some kind in you or in someone that you are close to, Jesus is not afraid of that thing. And Jesus, in his deeply grounded way, wants to heal it.

This past week, I was listening to a podcast called "The Emotionally Healthy Leader," by a Christian leader and pastor named Pete Scazzero. He was saying that, as we begin 2024, there is a radical decision that every leader, and every person, must make. That was the title of the podcast episode: "The radical decision that every leader must make." There's a little bit of clickbait in that title, but it got me to listen to it. Scazzero said that the radical decision every person must make is to *radically realign our lives around the purposes of God for us*.

I was kind of expecting him to say that there was some particular position leaders needed to take, or some particular church initiative leaders needed to start, or some particular effort that people needed to focus on at work. But of course, it would be possible for us to hold all the correct positions (if we could ever figure out what those are) and start all the correct programs (if we could ever figure out what those are), and to be doing them for wrong reasons. We could be doing them so that others would approve of us, or so that others would be impressed with us, or so that we could be seen as successful and grow in the eyes of the world. But all of that can turn to ashes in an instant, my friends.

The radical decision we must all make this year is to realign our lives around the purposes of God for us. This kind of realignment happens slowly, through prayer, and through the ongoing, slow surrender of our lives over to Jesus' guidance.

The people in our story said that Jesus taught with authority, not as the scribes. The scribes were the keepers of the texts, they were the maintainers of the tradition, they were the custodians of the institution. As someone, part of whose role is to be entrusted with being a custodian of an institution, I have great sympathy for the scribes. Scribes do valuable work. But it is very easy, in the pursuit of good institutional maintenance, to overvalue the *container* of the institution – the rules, policies, frameworks, the way we've done it before – and to avoid the risky, life-giving engagement of following Jesus towards the hurting people of the world, which lies at the heart of the institution we call the church.

One of the many things that we need to learn from the life and death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life we remember this weekend, is to *pay attention to the ones we are inclined to exclude*. Dr. King, I think we could say, performed *spiritual surgery* on American society and on the American church. Sometimes, people can hear a term like “spiritual surgery,” that seeks the healing of our enemy, that seeks to love and include the man with the unclean spirit, while removing the unclean spirit that is gripping the man, and we can get impatient. We may think, we don’t have time for spiritual surgery, we’ve got to fight a battle, don’t give me this soft stuff about “spiritual surgery.” Friends, Dr. King was assassinated for doing spiritual surgery; Jesus was executed for doing spiritual surgery. The demons and unclean spirits of the world are profoundly threatened by the spiritual surgery of Jesus, Dr. King, and the church. Spiritual surgery – and this is close to the heart of Jesus’ alternative wisdom – is God’s way of doing battle, and it involves paying attention to the ones we are inclined to exclude.

Friends, what is it in yourself that you most wish you could do away with? Who is the person in your family who most easily gets under your skin? Who are the people in our society that you would most like to get rid of? Psalm 118, Matthew 21, Mark 12, and Luke 20 all teach us that “the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” When the man with the unclean spirit stood up and cried out in the synagogue, you can bet your bottom dollar that there were people who just wanted to get rid of the guy. I’m thinking I might have been one of those people. But Jesus distinguishes between the man, who needed to be included, and the unclean spirit, which needed to be healed. This is so difficult, but my friends, this is so important. The people and the parts of your life that arouse enormous negative energy in you contain something very important for you to pay attention to.

Part of the reason why this sort of spiritual surgery is so difficult is that it is not always obvious what exactly those people and those parts of your life contain for you. It could be a part of you that you’ve been taught that you should be ashamed of, but that is actually a core part of who you are, and that you need to embrace with the love of Jesus. Or it could be a part of you that has good intentions for your life, that wants to help you and keep you safe, but that has grown all out of proportion and needs to be allowed to return to a proper role and size in your life. Or it could be a person or a group that you’ve been told you need to be afraid of, because they are a threat to you, and you need to eliminate them, when you actually need to get to know them, because it is harder to hate someone when you know their story. Or it could be a person or a group, like the man in the synagogue, who is possessed by some kind of an “unclean spirit,” in which case the prayerful work is to remove the unclean spirit without rejecting the person.

Spiritual surgery is difficult. Jesus' alternative wisdom of paying attention to the ones we are inclined to reject and exclude runs counter to just about every trend in our society that is so focused on eliminating our enemies and the opposition, so focused on shaming ourselves for the ways we don't measure up. But his alternative wisdom, of paying attention to the ones we are inclined to reject and exclude, will lead us towards the Beloved Community. To the one, triune, reconciling God, be all glory, honor, and praise, now and forever. Amen.