

“Testing the Boundaries”

January 31, 2021

Scripture: I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

This story about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he heals someone with an unclean spirit serves several purposes. The first is to establish his identity as Son of God which was given him at his baptism. So, in a sense this is the fulfillment of that privately given pronouncement in a public setting. Jesus has authority over spiritual beings. It’s similar to other areas of authority the writer of Mark will illustrate later on. In later stories Jesus will display power over the elements when he calms a storm at sea and over the material world when he walks on water and over the substance of life itself when he multiplies bread and fish. It’s easy to see how this encounter in the Capernaum synagogue fits into the bigger picture of who Jesus is.

But stories in the gospels often have layers of meaning and not just one. There’s more to this story than just what Jesus does. Why is it set in a synagogue on the Sabbath? And why now in his ministry and not later? Who is this person with an unclean spirit and what does he represent? And why is Jesus’ teaching such a threat?

Those are a lot of questions, questions that are worth asking and examining as we try to understand what’s happening in this story first told some two thousand years ago. One way to think about Jesus’ ministry is to look at it in terms of boundaries. What are the boundaries in his society that he’s violating? I’m inclined to think about them as at least three concentric circles.

Starting from the center we have the boundaries that exist between individuals. Individualism wasn’t really a concept in the first century world but there were certain controls on behavior between individuals that regulated social life. Mostly those had to do with ritual purity. For instance when a person developed a skin condition that caused lesions or open sores to appear, this was often described in the Bible as leprosy even though medically it wasn’t the same thing. But that condition rendered a person “unclean;” they couldn’t be touched, at least not in an intimate way for as long as they were infected. It’s a smart rule. In a world where antibiotics or fungal creams were non-existent a skin condition could spread like crazy and could be lethal. It wasn’t a punishment to cut that person off, it was survival. And of course there were many other rules of behavior that established boundaries between people, especially between men and women.

The next circle out were the boundaries of religion. How religion was practiced was tightly regulated, just as it is now for many religions. There was a difference between behavior in the synagogue and behavior in the temple in Jerusalem. The synagogue was much looser with men and women gathering together and reading of scripture was passed around the men, though probably women didn’t read. Still, there were boundaries to all of that.

The third circle is much more complex and its impact was felt differently in different parts of the Empire. For Jews who lived in the diaspora, outside of Judea, the boundaries between them and the Gentile world were probably fairly porous. There was a lot of interaction between them. But in Judea and Galilee, where the population understood itself to be occupied by a foreign power, the boundaries were much more rigid. Many of the Jewish people in Judea and Galilee felt they were under siege. They believed their way of life was threatened by an occupying army that was robbing them of their livelihoods and their future. Maintaining boundaries in that context was a matter of life and death.

So, when someone comes along with a message of inclusion and proclaims God's kingdom to be at hand, there were people who found that prospect very frightening. They pushed back. I think this person with an unclean spirit who yells at Jesus to leave them alone, who sees right through the innocent preacher façade and knows how destructive to the social order his message really is, this person is a manifestation of the fear they all have of losing their identity. Sometimes the troublemaker in a group is the one who says out loud what everyone is thinking. Jesus is testing the boundaries and sending ripples of anxiety through the world.

I think that's why this happens in a synagogue on the Sabbath right here at the very beginning of his ministry. Mark doesn't want us to have any illusions about the safety of Jesus' message. It is not safe. And the danger of it is most keenly felt in the heart of the community's religious and spiritual life. God's kingdom at hand means all the work that's done to secure the boundaries and maintain order is a waste of time because it's all about to fall apart. And the prospect of that, the prospect that all the divisions and hierarchies we work so hard to put in place and prop up are about to fall, can really freak some people out. It can drive them to become violent; to even try and undercut the foundations of the very order they claim to want to preserve. That mob we saw in Washington on January 6th? They had no use for the good news Jesus brings.

Now, Jesus handles the appearance of the unclean spirit easily. He just tells it to shut up and get out. But that's not so easy for us. I love this passage from First Corinthians because here we have a peek into how a community committed to God's kingdom still needs to negotiate and measure what's important. Paul is talking about eating meat offered to idols. That's not really an issue for us, so it's easy to gloss over what he has to say. But behind that issue is a deeper concern with how we understand our responsibility for each other. He makes this marvelous distinction between knowledge and love.

He says within the community there are different levels of maturity or strength. Those who are stronger have a responsibility for those who are weaker. That doesn't mean we have to measure everything by the lowest common denominator but those on the stronger end of the spectrum need to take those who are weaker into consideration and be gentle with them. The love we have by committing ourselves to the life and teaching of Jesus allows us to let go of our ego, the knowledge that can make us arrogant, for the sake of those whose faith is weaker or less

mature. And in doing that we can help them find strength and maturity, to move closer to a full expression of God's kingdom.

I don't think there's any denying that Jesus taught a message of love and acceptance, of openness and inclusion that went way beyond anything the people around him, Jew or gentile, found comfortable. And there are many today who identify as Christian but have no use for that message. Sometimes when we're faced with the kind of rejection of the gospel expressed through white supremacy or homophobia, anti-Semitism or Islamophobia, all we can do is tell it to shut up and get out. I don't think we can negotiate with the terrorism of unclean spirits. But there will always be milder disagreements we'll need to navigate together. Discerning what can be compromised and what's non-negotiable is a conversation every community needs to have. Figuring out those boundaries and testing them is part of what gives our life together substance and meaning.

We're called to have that conversation together within the confines of our commitment to God's kingdom by sharing the grace, love and peace of Christ. When we do that we can test the boundaries without fear as we live in the knowledge that God's kingdom truly is at hand; it's within our grasp, waiting for us to make it our own.

Amen