

January 31, 2021

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
What the Needy Need
Mark 1:21-28

Opening words: According to the Revised Common Lectionary this the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. The Gospel reading for today is from Mark. The three-hundred-pound gorilla sitting in the middle of the text is the demon possessed man. Do you believe in demon possession? Yes, I believe in demon possession. I have met a few demoniacs. I cannot dismiss every case as mental or emotional illness. It is important that you know I have always tried to read the Bible consistently. If the Bible says Jesus was a virgin birth, then it was a virgin birth. If the Bible says Jesus was resurrected after three days, then Jesus was resurrected after three days. If the Bible says the man was demon possessed, then the man was demon possessed. I am not going to walk down the road where we try to apply modern science to the Bible. That is not beneficial for our purpose. However, the text is not about demon possession. The text is about a man in need. That means the text is about doing ministry. With that understanding, the text comes to life for us. Our Gospel reading for today is Mark 1:21-28. Let me call this message *What the Needy Need?*

Mark 1:21-28 They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" ²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" ²⁶ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. ²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." ²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

I love the story of a hotel who was holding two conventions at the same time. One of the conventions salesmen. The other convention was ministers. When dinner came the kitchen had to work at top speed. For dessert, the salesmen were having spiked watermelon. But the chef discovered that it was being served to the ministers by mistake. "Quick!" he commanded a waiter. "Bring it back!" The waiter returned, reporting that it was too late. The ministers were already eating the liquor-spiced treat. "Did they like it?" asked the chef. "I believe they did," replied the waiter. "They are putting the seeds in their pockets." Today's message is not about ministers, those who are divinely called into Christian leadership. Today's message is about ministry, responding to human need in the name of Jesus. That takes us to our scripture reading.

We find ourselves today in the first chapter of Mark. Our reading for today follows the reading from last week. According to the text, Jesus and his followers, Peter, Andrew, James, and John are in Capernaum, the hometown of Peter. Jesus used Peter's home as a base of operation when he was in Galilee. On the Sabbath, Saturday, Jesus went to the local synagogue to worship. During that time, the synagogue was also used to teach the sacred scriptures. Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher, so he taught. Jesus's lesson was effective, and he impressed everyone who was present. Verse 22 says, he taught with authority. Everyone is happy, except one. A single individual was not impressed with Jesus. He was intimidated by Jesus. The author, Mark, explains why. The man was demon possessed. The demon spoke through the man and the demon inquired about Jesus's intentions. He asked, "What do you want from us?" Notice, it is one demon speaking for many. In the end, the demon is exorcised, and the man is liberated. The congregation is impressed and spreads the good news about Jesus. The eyewitnesses of the event cannot help but to tell their world. It is an amazing story. However, I hope you look at this old story in a new way. Do not just think of the man as a demon possessed man. Think of the man as an individual in need. Once you do, the story becomes relevant. How many needy people exist in our world?

How many needy people do you know? Today, I am not talking about world issues, like hunger, illiteracy, or political corruption. I am talking about individuals in your life who are struggling. There is no shortage. How many people do you know are struggling with a physical problem? How many people do you know are struggling with cancer? How many people do you know are struggling with the coronavirus? How many people do you know are struggling with a condition with no solution? How many people do you know are dealing with a broken relationship? Their brother lives around the corner, but they have not spoken for years. Does anyone know someone with a financial problem? Do you know someone who is facing bankruptcy? How many people do you know are filing for bankruptcy for a second time? How many people do you know are struggling with their parents? It maybe their health. It maybe their driving? You know Dad should not be driving but you just cannot take the keys. After all, he is your dad. Do you know of anyone who is struggling with their children? They are approaching forty and they still cannot live with you. They just cannot find the on ramp to the highway called life. Do you know of someone with a legal problem? Do I have to go on? Do I really have to go on? There are so many people with so many problems. We are surrounded by needy people. I do not know anyone who does not know someone, who is in need. The question is not if they have problems. The question is, how do you respond to those problems?

A select few are called to be ministers, but God expects all believers to minister, to serve Him in this world. We are surrounded by the needy. How comfortable are you responding to the needy? If not very, I hope this message helps you. Jesus models for us how to respond to the needy. If you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"** The needy need our attention.

In the 1950s, Stanley Arnold was asked to develop a marketing campaign for men's shavers' manufacturer, Remington. It was considered one of the most conservative companies in America. The project intimidated Arnold at first but then came up with a magnificent idea. He went to the New York offices of Merrill and Lynch and placed the ultimate odd-lot order: "I want to purchase," he told the broker, "one share of every single stock listed on the New York Stock Exchange." It came to more than \$42,000 for one share in each of the 1098 companies listed at the time. Arnold took his diversified portfolio into a meeting of Remington's board of directors, where he argued passionately for a sweepstakes campaign with the top prize called "A Share in America." The conservative old gentlemen shifted around in their seats and discussed the idea for a while. "But Mr. Arnold," said one, "we are not in the securities business. We are in the shaver business." "I agree that you are not in the securities business," said Arnold, "but I think you also ought to realize that you are not in the shaver business either. You are in the people business." He was right!

May we never forget we are in the people business. We are not in the restaurant business. We are not in the building maintenance business. We are not in the education business. We are not in the music business. We are not in the keeping traditions alive business. Those things are not bad, but they are not our business. We are in the people business because Jesus was in the people business. Jesus came into the world to be the bridge between God and man. We are to help people find that bridge. The people who have helped me the most during my time of need did not just give me a check or can of tuna. The people who helped me the most gave me some attention. Jesus spoke to the man directly and gave him his attention. How much attention are you giving the needy in your world? If that makes you think say, **"Amen!"** The needy need our attention. However, the needy do not just need our attention. They also need our respect.

Consider this simple fact with me, most of the time the Bible does not report Jesus's planned and formal teachings. Rather, the Bible talks about the interruptions that came along as Jesus traveled. That is what happened in this story. Jesus goes to the synagogue to worship and teach. Mark does not tell us the topic of his lecture, but Mark does tell us about the interruption caused by the demonic. An exorcism was not on the agenda. However, there is no sign in the text, Jesus was upset about the interruption. The most important thing to Jesus was people. This is not the only place. In the eighth chapter of Luke, Jesus came down from the mountainside and was interrupted by a leper. In the end, Jesus heals the man. In the same chapter, a centurion came to Jesus begging for his servant. His quality of life is near zero, but in the end, Jesus heals him. In the story of Zacchaeus, Luke 19, Jesus enters Jericho and is welcomed by a big crowd. However, a small man, Zacchaeus, stops the whole parade. Once again, Jesus is interrupted and, once again, Jesus does not care. Time and time again, Jesus was interrupted, and time and time again, Jesus treated those interruptions with respect because people are more important than agendas or plans. Jesus respected everyone.

Let us be honest, life is hard. There are many who feel like they do not matter. The

world is constantly telling us we do not matter. We do not matter because we are too old, or young. We do not matter because we do not have a vast portfolio. We do not matter because we do not have the right connections. We do not matter because of the color of our skin, our sexual identity, or our educational level. The world is always telling us we do not matter, but we do matter. When you treat someone with respect, you are telling them they matter. Jesus showed the leper he mattered. When Jesus healed the centurion's servant, he told him he mattered. When Jesus stopped the parade for Zacchaeus, he was telling him he mattered. When Jesus healed the demonic in the synagogue, he was telling him he mattered. When you help the needy you are telling them, they matter, and you matter too. Everyone matters because everyone is loved by God. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" The needy need our attention. The needy need our respect. The needy need our honesty.

The other day, I was at home watching one of those morning shows. The segment was about eating healthy. They had a skinny bald man on who was making healthy smoothies you could eat for breakfast. It started off with a frozen banana and some buckwheat, followed by kale. Then, he added seeds and bran flakes. He finished it off by throwing in a tumble weed and an acorn, for flavor. He hit the button on the blender and the final product was poured into a glass. Can I be honest with you? It looked disgusting. The interviewer drank his and told the world it was delicious. Then, they went back to the studio and the other announcers said they were jealous because it looked great. There must have been six back at the studio, but only one was honest. Carson Daily said, that looks disgusting. Make me a donut smoothy. Everyone else was shocked by his response, but I thought it was great because he was simply being honest.

Thomas Jefferson once said, "*Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom.*" The needy need our honesty. Sometimes honesty is affirming. "You aren't that bad." "Do not be so hard on yourself." "You are a good person." "You are not stupid." Sometimes, our honesty sounds critical. You do not want to hurt them, but they need to learn. Respect them enough to tell them the truth. Does someone in your life need to hear they are a financial disaster because they need to get a job. Does someone in your life need to hear they are lonely because they are selfish? Does someone in your life need to hear you have done nothing with their life because you lack ambition and drive. Does someone in your life need to hear their health is poor because they have unhealthy habits. They eat too much. They exercise too little. They smoke. Does someone in your life do poor in school and says the teachers are poor and do not like them. Respect them enough to be honest. They are lazy, not unliked or stupid. Does someone in your life need honesty? Do not tell them those things because you want to hurt them. Be honest with them because you care about them and want to help them. Jesus was honest with the demonic. He had a spiritual problem. The needy need honesty. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" The needy need our attention, respect, and honesty. Let me end with this old preaching story.

An elderly widow, restricted in her activities, was eager to serve Christ. After praying about this, she realized that she could bring blessing to others by playing her piano. The next day she placed this small ad in the Oakland Tribune: "Pianist will play hymns by phone daily for those who are sick and despondent--the service is free." The notice included the number to dial. When people called, she would ask, "What hymn would you like to hear?" Within a few months her playing had brought cheer to several hundred people. Many of them freely poured out their hearts to her, and she was able to help and encourage them. Her ministry had touched the lives of many! That simple story illustrates a simple point.

We are surrounded by needy people. It can be overwhelming but remember these three points. The needy need our attention. The needy need our respect. The needy need, and deserve, our honesty. We are surrounded by a needy world. How are you going to respond? If that makes you think say, **"Amen!"**