

Finding Our Way to One Another So We Can Heal **Mark 1:21-28**

After Jesus was baptized, and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven saying “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”, and after Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness, being tested by Satan, experiencing hunger and thirst, and taken to the limits of his mortality, Jesus knows in every part of his being that he *is* God’s beloved Son, and as he begins his vocation as a Jewish Rabbi, he understands his religion’s laws and traditions from his own embodiment of love.

So, in our gospel reading this morning, when Jesus teaches in the Synagogue on a Sabbath, people attentively listen to love incarnate speaking to them. But unlike other Sabbaths, something unusual happens: Suddenly Jesus is interrupted by a man tormented by an unclean spirit. The man cries out: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”

Isn’t it interesting that this man chose to come to the Synagogue? That he showed up on the Sabbath? And didn’t stay quietly hidden, but disrupted the service? This man brought all of his torment and pain and suffering right into the center of his community, making it seen and known. Others may have stayed away, as this community was all about faithfully studying the Law and faithfully following it. In order to stay clean and pure in relationship to God and to maintain right relationship with one another, the Sabbath was the holiest of all days, when people abstained from work and eating certain types of food and activities, preparing them to participate in holy rituals and to be renewed in their faith.

This man is not pure or clean. He has not readied himself to encounter what is holy. He cannot make a positive contribution to this group of God-fearing people. But he shows up, and in doing so he meets Jesus face to face—Love incarnate. Who can identify with his suffering from his own experience with Satan in the wilderness?

In her book *The Amen Effect*, Rabbi Sharon Brous describes an ancient Jewish ritual that can give us insight into our gospel story. It speaks to what it means to be human in a world of pain, and how we can find healing through identifying with one another’s suffering. In this ritual, several times a year, hundreds of thousands of Jews would travel to Jerusalem, climb the steps to the Temple Mount and enter into its enormous plaza. Together, they would turn to the right and begin walking in a wide circle, in a steady stream. But those who came to the ritual and were brokenhearted, mourning, lonely, or sick, those who were facing any kind of suffering and adversity, even those who had been otherwise ostracized from the community for having caused harm, would turn to the left going against the tide, and as people on the right passed the people on the left, they could see those who were suffering face to face and ask “What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?” Then they would listen to the person’s story and offer them a blessing before continuing on. Rabbi Brous calls this the amen effect, which she defines as: “Sincere, tender encounters that help us forge new spiritual and neural pathways by reminding us that our lives and our destinies are entwined, because, ultimately, it is only by finding our way to one another that we will begin to heal”

When we are going through difficulties in our own lives— when we are brokenhearted, mourning, lonely, or sick, when we are overcome with guilt and shame and all the mistakes we’ve made, we may be more inclined to stay away rather than show up. We may feel too messy, too complicated, too unworthy, too much of a liability to be in relationship with others or to participate in our community or even to come to church.

But as Rabbi Brous says: “It is only by finding our way to one another that we will begin to heal”, and we see this healing take place in our gospel narrative when Jesus comes face to face with the man in the Synagogue, sees this man’s suffering, and with the authority of one who knows that he is God’s beloved Son, and with the authority of one who has faced his own suffering and mortality,

trials and test and temptations, and with the authority of the full embodiment of love incarnate, Jesus gives this man a blessing of new life — by rebuking the unclean spirit saying: “Be silent, and come out of him!” Jesus sets a limit on what has been tormenting him, essentially saying: “Enough is enough! Leave this man alone!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing and crying with a loud voice, comes out of him. Jesus has silenced the loud voice of deception that has been tempting this man for we don’t know how long, to believe he can’t have anything to do with God, so that the man can return to hearing the gentle voice of love (The same voice of love that spoke to Jesus at the time of his baptism) saying: “You are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased.”

In returning to his community and not staying hidden, but seeking Jesus out, this man has been healed. I think this is something we can all relate to. While the unclean spirit in this gospel story is likely referring to a demon, haven’t we all been held captive to our own inner “demons”, demons like shame, guilt, regret, blame, self-pity? Haven’t we all struggled to silence the voices in our mind that are judging and condemning us, telling us we are unworthy, and to stay away from the very people who could help us? What would happen if we didn’t let our suffering or shame or mistakes take over and lead us into further isolation, but we saw it as an invitation to move towards one another? To seek support? To share our stories? To be known and loved and received? So that we might begin to heal?

Rabbi Brous says: “Showing up for one another doesn’t require heroic gestures, it means training ourselves to approach even when our instinct tells us to withdraw. It means picking up the phone and calling our friend or colleague who is suffering. It means going to the funeral and the house of mourning. It also means going to the wedding and the birthday dinner. Reach out in your strength, step forward in your vulnerability, err on the side of presence”.

So, I invite you to consider today:

Why does your heart ache? And who can you share this with? Maybe you’ll call a friend, or talk to someone at coffee hour, or go to the Blessed Group to share your grief in a safe community. And I invite you to consider: How might you show up for someone else today? Who in your life is brokenhearted, mourning, lonely, or sick? Who is celebrating or having a life event? Maybe you’ll give that person a phone call, or invite them to coffee, or choose to go to their celebration to show them that you care.

As Rabbi Brous said, these are the: “Sincere, tender encounters that help us forge new spiritual and neural pathways by reminding us that our lives and our destinies are entwined because, just as the man with the unclean spirit found his way back to his Synagogue and to Jesus ultimately, it is only by finding our way to one another that we will begin to heal.”