

# *Uncomfortable Truth from Surprising Places*

a sermon

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Mark 1:21–28

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To tell you the truth, this passage bothers me.

Maybe it bothers you, too.

Now, if it does bother you, maybe your reasons for being bothered are different than mine.

Maybe they're the same.

For me, one of the reasons why I'm bothered is that I don't attribute mental illness to the influence of spiritual forces or demonic possession.

I just don't.

The outlook on mental disturbance reflected in these verses, shared by pretty much all people at that time, is alien to me.

It just is.

When someone is mentally disturbed, I tend to look for psychiatric explanations and medical causes rather than for spirits and demons. I'm in good company.

In doing that, I don't think I'm being dismissive or disrespectful of the Bible.

People two thousand years ago had very few tools to understand or explain or treat things like

epilepsy,  
schizophrenia,  
Tourette syndrome,  
schizo-affective disorder,  
bi-polar disorder,  
extreme clinical depression,

and other mental health problems and dysfunctions of the nervous system.

But I love scripture. Through it, by it, God has taught me and molded me; again and again God has done this. Part of that molding and teaching results in me seeing my modern outlook as incomplete, imperfect, capable of error and hubris. Part of the teaching and molding has led me to have a little more humility about what I know and don't know. Even as I might not be inclined to go looking for demonic explanations for trials and troubles, neither can I dismiss them. There is a reality beyond the visible, the physical, and the medical.

And, what God shows me often in scripture is that I can learn from ancient ways of thinking. God shows me that those ancient ways can become the vehicle for delivering a truth that is as fresh as this morning.

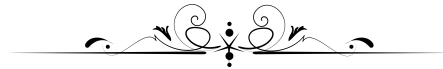
It's not that I must see the world as would a pre-modern person. Really, that is not possible. You and I are just as truly located in *our* time and place as were those who heard Jesus speak in person located in their *own* time and place.

Instead, by recognizing and acknowledging the differences in outlook between me and those in biblical times, as well as the similarities, I often come to see a bit more clearly what God is doing in a portion of scripture. And then maybe I notice even more the in-breaking of revelation into that moment, and then into my own.

When that happens, it sometimes makes me happy. It may even give me joy.

But let's be honest here: sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the truth scripture speaks makes me uncomfortable. I hear the truth, and it discomferts. I see the truth, and it disturbs. And when it does, *it probably should*.

Often, I am *right* to be uncomfortable.



In the passage before us, Jesus goes into a synagogue to teach. Suddenly, there's a ruckus, right there in the synagogue while Jesus is teaching. It was a man, unnamed, described only as "a man with an unclean spirit." He shouts out, right at Jesus, right while he was teaching.

Awkward.

And rude!

"He's crazy."

"He's possessed."

"Don't pay any attention to him."

"Ignore him and maybe he'll go away."

This is what *he* says:

"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."

Now, there's something in this that I find very surprising. And a bit disturbing. And it is this: everything the man with the unclean spirit says ... is *true*. Every. Single. Thing.

It all

expresses the truth,  
recognizes the truth,  
points to the truth,  
grapples with the truth.

The man was right ... that Jesus had a reason to be among them, so that asking "what have you to *do* with us?" recognizes the truth that the presence of Jesus in their midst is not a neutral thing. It's no momentary diversion. It's no passing entertainment, having no lasting impact, asking nothing and requiring nothing. No, Jesus has *to do* with us.

And so the man saw the truth and gave it voice: that Jesus comes in to make a difference, to change lives, to call forth response and obedience.

The man was right ... to be concerned that Jesus was there to destroy, not the man himself, not his neighbors and family, not *that* "us" but rather to destroy the "us" of the unclean spirit and its corrupt partners,

to destroy the realm of evil,  
to disrupt the forces of possession,  
to make clean what is unclean.

And so he saw the truth and gave it voice: that Jesus was a threat to powers that benefit from things being not the way they're supposed to be.

And the man was right ... that Jesus was "the Holy One of God," correct in his perception that Jesus

was not just a traveling instructor of religious morality,  
not just a powerful spiritual personality,  
not just a good man  
    who spoke good words  
    in a good way,

He saw the truth and gave it voice: that Jesus is special, more than special, that he is the one distinctly and uniquely blessed by God to remake all things.



So the man tells the truth. And then, right afterward, Jesus tells him ... to be silent.

Why? Why does Jesus do that?

Is this the reward for telling the truth? To be silenced?

It is a cruel reality that for many, the truth they speak is unwelcome. Maybe that's your experience. You know how it goes. Others have already made up their minds. They've pronounced their judgment. They now want you to stop talking, and go away.

The pain of such experiences is deep. And it's understandable if those who have such pain would hear from within that pain this verse and find the painful memory of rejection washing over them again: "Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent...'"

But the thing is, when Jesus says, "Be silent," this was a step toward *healing* the man. Jesus is not actually saying that to the *man*, but rather to the *unclean spirit* that had taken over the man. He was speaking not to the man's *true* self, but instead to a *false* self. *And the silencing of what was false had to happen before the true could come out and find its voice.*

Jesus commands the unclean spirit to come out. With that, he puts an end to the reign of terror exerted over that poor, nameless man. From that point on, the man would speak *his own* words, think *his own* thoughts, form *his own* opinions, lead *his own* life. In silencing the unclean spirit, Jesus gives the man his freedom, and allows room for truth to be declared all the more.



It's a curious and disturbing thing about the gospels that, very often, even usually, it is not the religious leaders, it is not the people gathered to see him, it is not even his own devoted disciples, it is none of *those* who are the ones to identify correctly who Jesus is and what he means. Instead, it's the possessed, those not in their right minds, who see Jesus for who he is and say so.

And I tell you, this bothers me! And I think it likely bothers you, too. It works against expectations deeply ingrained and finely honed. We are inclined to listen to the conventional,

to look for truth from the respectable, to accept the word of the polite, the kind, the nice. And when we feel uncomfortable, we are inclined to tune out the cause of our discomfort, and cast out the disturber of our peace.

You know how it goes. When someone comes to us speaking uncomfortable truths, our defenses go up and we bring out all sorts of tools and tricks and weapons, all so we can protect ourselves and attack the messenger and the truth she, or he, delivers.

Of course, there are good reasons to be cautious. Rudeness undercuts credibility. And we've all known those who think they can compensate for their ignorance by being louder and ruder.

I think of something the Swiss theologian Karl Barth once wrote in a letter. He wrote this to a pastor and scholar who had written a brutal review of a book by another scholar, and then proudly shared it with Barth, expecting him to be impressed. Barth was not. Instead, Barth wrote something like this: "What you say is correct. But it is not true. Only that which is said in love is true."

I really like that. I remember it often, and it serves as a pretty useful guide for me. I try to say what I have to say in love, because otherwise it might be correct yet not true.

Yet this biblical account of the man with an unclean spirit gives me pause. It also disturbs me. For the glory of Jesus Christ is shown, in part, by the recognition of his significance

by those who are not what we call "good,"  
by those who are unexpected,  
by those who fear the truth that they accurately name,  
by those whom others wish would shut up and go away.

Even more disturbing, because here it gets more personal, Christ's glory, his magnificence is seen also in this reality: that he calls *us* to speak his truth, even when it is uncomfortable, even when it isn't the so-called "right time."

Sometimes we will speak the truth without even realizing how true it is. We might be entirely unaware of the truth we say or show. It's hard to take credit then, hard to feel pride in the truth we've said, when it is so clearly beyond us, so obviously something we can take no credit for uncovering or declaring.

I am also struck by the reality that Jesus himself was not only *acclaimed* for what he said; he was also *rejected*. He spoke the truth, and it disturbed, it bothered, it made people uncomfortable, it made them mad. Those in authority resented that he with no qualifications would have the acclaim of the crowds who flocked to hear his teaching.

Jesus was the walking, talking personification of uncomfortable truth from surprising places. And he remains that.

For his truth

continues to challenge the forces of domination.  
It continues to highlight our own ignorance.  
It continues to shine a light on our fear.  
It continues to call us to speak and bear witness.  
It continues to raise up and lay low.

Jesus is himself uncomfortable truth from surprising places. He was and is the truth that challenges and discomforts even as it blesses and heals, a truth that came, and still comes

from the right hand of the Father,  
from a manger in Bethlehem,  
from the Jordan River,  
from roads he walked and hills where he taught,  
from a table set with bread and wine and surrounded by beloved friends,  
from a cross,  
from an empty tomb.



My friends, like the man who spoke a truth he feared and then was healed, may we

express the truth,  
recognize the truth,  
point to the truth,  
grapple with the truth.

May we see the truth and give it voice: that Jesus comes in to make a difference, to change our lives, to call forth our response and our obedience.

May we see the truth and give it voice: that Jesus is a threat to powers that benefit from things being not the way they're supposed to be.

May we see the truth and give it voice: that Jesus is special, more than special, that he is the one distinctly and uniquely blessed by God to remake all things.

*Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.  
(Revelation 7:12, NRSV)*