

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is beginning his public ministry. There is no red carpet, no stretch limo, no press releases. The TV cameras weren't there, nobody followed it on social media. On this day, Jesus was making a normal Sabbath visit to the synagogue, where the faithful gathered to pray and study. The usual scene.

It wasn't unusual that Jesus was asked to speak. Any competent Jewish male could be asked to do that. And so, Jesus sat down—which is what teachers did—and as he speaks, there is a spark of something new in the air.

Now, religious scholars never claimed a teaching as their own *personal* word; they quoted what others had said. They piled footnote on footnote, in a well-ordered, time-honored tradition. "It is written, and is what the writers wrote about what is written." *And so on.*

There in that synagogue, as Jesus taught them, people were amazed, because Jesus seemed to be different than their other teachers. He taught "*with authority.*" In today's lesson, we don't hear any specifics about *what* Jesus taught, but we *do* see his teaching put into action: Jesus heals a man, whose "unclean spirit" is silenced and sent away.

Jesus heals, not with *ideas* about God, although clearly, he valued learning. Jesus puts things right by *being* the voice of God the author of all things, *ultimate* source of authority. At heart, God is not *something* to be thought about, but *someone* to relate to. Knowledge that doesn't make it from the *head* to the *heart* and the *hands* is not particularly useful for following Jesus faithfully. At times, it can just get in the way.

The demons *know* the facts, but they reject Jesus. As they rudely call Jesus "the Holy One of God," they get the *words* exactly right. But just spouting doctrinal truths doesn't cut it. Not even quoting an impressive stream of Bible verses. Even the *devil* quotes Scripture while tempting Jesus in the wilderness. Just getting the bumper sticker slogans right doesn't guarantee anything. The demons know *who* Jesus is, but they are God's enemies, holding their captives hostage to hopelessness, fear and self-deception; keeping them from experiencing God's love. The demons encounter the authority of Jesus, and they are afraid, *as well they might be*. For Jesus has come to free people from the binding power of evil. And here's a twist in the story. The demons recognize the authority of Jesus, even if the religious insiders do not acknowledge it.

In the second lesson for today, the congregation in the city of Corinth had among them folks who knew all the *right answers*, who had all the *right slogans*. SuperChristians. Just ask 'em. They'll tell you. Yet, *like the demon* who knew the right answer but worked against God, their knowledge is getting in the way. They ran roughshod over others in their community; they used their knowledge to puff themselves up, rather than to build up the Community of Believers. Their failure to consider others puts a crimp in their relationship with *God*. Well, it's not "*how much you know*" that matters to God, but "*who you know* and *how well* you love others in response."

The demons know who Jesus is, but Jesus tells them to be quiet. No one in Mark's Gospel *really* understands who Jesus is, until that begins to change at the cross, the Roman centurion confesses, *surely this was a Son of God*. That *cross* is the key to “*getting the right answer*” with our head, and “*trusting God*” with our heart. There, *at the cross*, we see most clearly the amazing new kind of divine authority of Jesus displayed.

Trusting Jesus is the life-changing power of *living into* God's good news for us. Trust isn't about putting the words just so. Belief isn't saying yes to pile of propositions, agreeing to a checklist of true statements. Belief in Jesus is about *trust*, about *listening* and *following*, about finding one's life turned around because God's love for us is making a difference in our lives. It is about responding to God's love by turning your life toward loving others. Only God's love frees us to do this; we have seen this love in the *cross of Christ*, our Savior faithful even to the point of death.

There is a cartoon, set in old “Grimy Gulch.” Judge Frump and the Sheriff are looking out at the town from the court room window. The judge complains “Just look out there! What a revolting sight! Weeds everywhere, litter and potholes in the broken streets . . . falling-down shacks . . . broken-down horses . . . citizens abusing and citizens abused. No wonder they call Grimy Gulch the *armpit of the West*! I can't *stand* the sight of this mess any longer! As judge of this community, I *intend* to do something about it! . . . Sheriff! Run over and buy some curtains for this window immediately!” Well, that's one possible approach to the use of authority. Get some curtains and hide yourself from the whole sorry mess. But that's not God's way. *Jesus is out on the streets of Grimy Gulch*.

What demons lurk in your Grimy Gulch? What does Jesus battle among us? God calls us to join our Lord in fighting illness, like helping to provide vaccines and encourage healthy practices; fighting injustice, like advocating for fair economic policies; fighting violence, like helping people say no to hate speech and bullying. Our mission is *not* to pretty things up with curtains of denial so we don't have to see the weeds anymore. Jesus calls out the demons, and, after their last blast of angry evil—demons do that kind of thing—they are banished.

What could keep us from resisting evil? What keeps us from trust and obedience, from loving others as Jesus has loved us? Is it our fear that it will be too much? God promises to be with us and to help us along the way. The way of the cross can drive out our self-centeredness and self-righteousness, and our presumptions about how the world *should* work *to serve us*. Following the way of Jesus can drive out our resistance to loving our enemies, and our stubborn insistence on running our own lives for our own benefit, for our own comfort and protection. Maybe we fall into going along with God's authority of “*love in action*” only when God fits into *our* assumptions and plans. Whether we realize it or not, that's hanging curtains up to deny the brokenness. That's not the power of God to drive out the demons.

The healing of the one possessed demonstrates the authority of Jesus to forgive, to heal, to free the captives. Even before the cross, which allowed the disciples to understand Jesus more fully, signs of God's new order are present: Jesus confronts an oppressed and possessed world, controlled by those with presumed and pretended power. These powers lose their punch under the cleansing and clarifying word of Jesus. *Be quiet! Go away!*

God did more for us in “*Grimy Gulch*” than just “*hang pretty curtains.*” God’s prophets pronounced messages of challenge and promise. The promised Savior Jesus breaks through the walls that evil keeps on building. Even when evil threatens to swallow everything up, to beat everyone down, we don’t have to give in! *We don’t have to let fear and hatred and death have the last word*, because they don’t. God is still out on the streets of Grimy Gulch. Jesus became one of us, died in our place and now is alive forever. God promises to give us courage and guidance to resist the power of the evil one, marked by the cross and Easter life of Christ.

Although we do not often see the evil one silenced so dramatically as in today’s Gospel lesson, we can look for God wielding that powerful authority. See the evil one being silenced at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, where trusting God to heal is the *first step* in getting free from the power of addictions. See the evil one being silenced in Habitat for Humanity, with people working together to provide families with decent housing, hope and dignity. See the evil one being silenced when a parent loves a child, a child lovingly cares for a parent, a neighbor reaches out with a kind word and a listening ear. See the Evil One silenced when we put our caring into action, not giving in to cynicism or hopelessness. When in God’s name and through Spirit of Jesus, we refuse to just “hang curtains,” the Evil One knows the end is surely coming.

So, rise and shine, for you are the people of God in this place, and there is holy work to do. Christ has entered our human story, and walks the streets of whatever Grimy Gulch the powers of evil can continue to lay out. See how Christ *sends the powers of evil reeling*, see how He *brings us freedom, light and life and healing*. So, *go out and tell the story of Jesus’ glory*; celebrate with your whole life the *amazing-grace* power of God’s love.