

Do you remember any of your teachers who were truly gifted? Someone who held your interest no matter how dry the material was. Someone who made you want to read the whole novel, not just skim the Cliff Notes? Some who made the framing of the Constitution fun to learn about? That must have been the way Jesus was on this Sabbath day.

As he is teaching, right in the middle of his lesson, a man suddenly stands up in the congregation and shouts loudly "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!"¹

Oh, no! What a way for one of the worshippers to treat a visiting preacher. How embarrassing for the congregation. You can hear them asking each other? What is he saying? What does he mean? Why doesn't he stop talking and sit down.

The only thing we know about the man is what Mark tells us; that the man is possessed by an evil spirit. A demon. Maybe today we would call it mental illness. He just is not right; can't seem to control himself.

But, Jesus knows. Jesus knows that these evil spirits, which he will encounter over and over again, are driven by the devil and are set on ending his ministry before it begins. They want him to fail.

"Be quiet!" says Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" As the spirit departs from the man, he convulses and shrieks, then, all is quiet.

As the people get up to leave, their conversations continue in wonderment. Who is this teacher that even the evil spirits obey him? Where does he get his power?

As they reach their neighborhoods, they share their story with others, and Jesus' fame begins to spread far and wide.

We are left to wonder if they heard what the man said to Jesus? Did they hear him call Jesus the holy one of God? Did it register to them that this gifted teacher was much more than just a gifted teacher?

They all go their separate ways, remembering what they remember, and telling others what they saw. I would imagine that Jesus is portrayed as everything

¹ Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from Mark, chapter 1 (NIV)

from Moses or Elijah reappearing to the magician who performs tricks with coins and animals in the market. Did any recognize him as God's Son?

I'm sure many looked forward to hearing Jesus again. Maybe they were in crowd that would hear Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount; maybe among those five thousand Jesus would feed lunch; maybe they would be in the crowd throwing down palm branches and cloaks as he entered Jerusalem for the final time; maybe they would be in the mob screaming "**crucify him – crucify him**" on Good Friday three years later.

And Mark's story ends.

If we were keeping score, the score would be Jesus one, evil spirits zero!

But, this is much more than a game between Jesus and the devil. This is Jesus at his finest reaching out and helping those in need.

And, what about the man that Jesus healed? Did Jesus just leave him lying on the synagogue floor? Could he just leave him behind as he continued on his way? Maybe going to Peter's house, or somewhere else for lunch or to the local marketplace for a cup of tea?

Mark leaves that up to us. In this story, it is up to us to decide what happens to this man who has been touched by Jesus.

How do people react when Jesus touches them? Maybe if we know how others react, we can figure out how this man reacted. The four gospel writers tell us about many people who are healed by Jesus. Some return and say "thanks", some run and tell all their friends and neighbors; some join his band of followers. One, Peter's mother in law, gets up and begins to fix him a meal after she is healed by Jesus. Others accept his healing without a second thought that we know of, and go on their merry way.

What about this man who has been healed by Jesus? What happened to him? We never hear about him again. Mark doesn't tell us, and, in his version of the story, Luke doesn't tell us either.

I think this is where Mark wants us to complete the story on our own.

Unlike the crowd in the synagogue that Sabbath morning, we know who Jesus really is. We know Jesus is God's Son and that he has come with a message of repentance and forgiveness and love and peace.

We have heard him teach us to care for each other. He has clearly answered the question that Cain asked God in Genesis: am I my brother's keeper? Jesus says, yes, yes you are.

In his parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus tells us that we can't just walk by leaving someone lying on the ground. In the scriptures we see Jesus comfort widows; restore those with leprosy to complete health; heal children and aged people alike. Heal the rich and the poor; Jews and gentiles. Hebrews and Romans. Men and women. Jesus has compassion on all. At least on all who are struggling and willing to listen; those with open minds about God and God's love in the world.

So, we know Jesus would not leave this man lying on the synagogue floor and walk away. We know he would have compassion and help him as he returns to his family and friends no longer suffering from the effects of his illness.

I wonder if it just could be that the picture in our back sanctuary window is of Jesus comforting the man he has just healed? Could this picture of Jesus be one of him right at the start of his ministry? Are the angels peering over his shoulder watching to see that he is doing it right? Are they getting ready to report back to God that Jesus is beginning to reach the people who need to be reached? Is the man weeping and hearing Jesus' soft voice telling him that everything will be all right from now on?

I think that is a wonderful picture of Jesus for us to have in our minds as we come to this table in a few minutes to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. Just hear Jesus telling you that since he died for you, everything will be alright from now on. That he rose for you and has you in his arms, comforting you, talking softly, as only Jesus can talk to you. Listen to his message of love and peace and comfort, and take it to heart.

You are a child of God, loved and blessed, showered with God's Grace, every day of your life.

AMEN.

