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1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

COMING CLEAN

We've heard them – the disruptions that come in the middle of a worship service. We're right here on Connecticut Avenue. It's not uncommon for the police car or fire truck sirens to sound forth as they go by. But they are outside – and they are generally beyond ear range in a few seconds. There is also the occasional cry of a child – it might actually be nice if that happened a bit more often. But usually the child gets comforted or gets taken out of the sanctuary for a while. The first church I served was across the street from a college. There was a period of time when the college security communication system was on the same frequency as the church's remote microphones. At first we didn't know where the voices were coming from. Coming through the sound system in the middle of a service there were these kind of comments: "We checked out that suspicious character – he went on and on. He really didn't know what he was talking about. I don't know what he was doing there." The preacher looked all around, thinking about asking, "Who me?" But the snafu was easily resolved with a switch to a new frequency. We, particularly the 'we' who are leading worship, don't always delight in disruptions in the middle of a service. We've got things planned out, don't you know. Everything's listed in the bulletin. We Presbyterians are known for being 'decent and orderly.'

Capernaum was a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Ruins of one of the oldest synagogues in the world are there. The place of worship was built in the fourth or fifth century in the common era. But beneath the foundation of that synagogue lies the foundation of an earlier synagogue, thought to be from the first century. Perhaps it was the very building in which Jesus taught as described in our passage from Mark's Gospel. ¹

It was the beginning of his ministry. He had just called some fishermen to follow him, to learn from his teachings about putting God in charge of things, having used kingdom or reign of God terminology. There in Capernaum, there are other ruins of a house near the synagogue that had inscriptions showing that early Christians thought the house had belonged to Simon Peter, one of those former-fishermen followers. So it could be that Jesus was teaching in Peter's hometown synagogue. It was the Sabbath. These observant Jews gathered for worship and Jesus had been invited to teach. Wait, Mark doesn't tell us he was invited. It just says, "They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught." Maybe he was invited and his name was in the 'bulletin' for the service. Or maybe he got there early and was just talking about things before the service and everyone started listening to him, because Mark tells us he spoke with an authority that the leaders, the learned scribes of the synagogue lacked. But perhaps they were beginning to think of Jesus as a disruption to their worship service. The power of his teaching made them look not so great by comparison.

But then the more obvious disruption occurred. Even as he had been saying that Jesus was teaching powerfully, Mark writes, "Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit." An unclean spirit - it could have described it as an 'evil' spirit or as a 'demonic' spirit, but the word 'unclean' is used instead. Ritual purity was an important practice for many Jews then and since. There were certain practices of washing if one had been exposed to someone who was ill or if they had been around certain animals or a corpse or even certain people outside the religious community. They tried to 'clean up' for

worship. The synagogue was thought of as a sacred place, so an effort to get 'cleaned up' for worship in the best sense showed respect for the holy God who would be the focus of worship.

This 'unclean' spirit seems to feel threatened by Jesus' presence, crying out disruptively, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" Perhaps it expressed the same feelings some of the scribes may have been having with this Jesus having shown up. The 'unclean' spirit seems to know more about this Jesus than others who were there, calling out further saying, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." I'm not sure how to describe this spirit scientifically, but theologically it had spiritual knowledge, even beyond what others in the synagogue had, recognizing who God was using. The spirit knew who Jesus was, but it did not want to submit to his authority and God's ways. We also see when it comes out of the man, that it had quite a grip on him. Indeed, after Jesus silenced the spirit and told it to come out of the man, Mark tells us that it threw the man into convulsions and cried out loudly as it came out of him. I wish Mark had told us what things were like for the man after that point. But we do get the positive response from the crowd at the synagogue who were amazed at what Jesus had done for the man.

It was an unclean spirit. I'm not sure where the idiom comes from, but 'coming clean' is a phrase that means telling the truth about something you have tried to hide.² If we are willing to tell the truth, this scriptural story tells us that a worship service can be a dangerous place for us if we come here thinking that we don't want God to change anything. There are religious communities where the religion isn't authoritative because it doesn't change anyone's lives, and they sort of like that. I dare say that they may all shower before coming to church and they wear clean clothes and look nice, but that such a community may have an unclean spirit because it views even the liberating work Jesus wants to do as a disruption, rather than as the primary purpose of the One to whom we submit in worship.

I've shared what Annie Dillard has written before but it expresses in different terms what I've just said. She writes, "Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return."³

I'm not actually suggesting crash helmets for next Sunday, but keeping a worship service "decent and orderly" doesn't have to be the highest goal. Perhaps it is time to come clean with ourselves about the less-than-clean spirit of expectation that resides within each one of us. If we do that, we just may have a serious encounter with the Holy One of God as our liberating Lord who leaves us cleanly amazed.

¹ Information gathered from a personal trip to Capernaum.

² [Cambridge Dictionary of American Idioms](http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/come+clean) Copyright © Cambridge University Press 2003. <http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/come+clean>

³ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.