Sunday, January 29, 2006
A NEW TEACHING
Mark 1:21-28

According to the gospel named Mark, when the people in Capernaum first heard Jesus teach on the Sabbath in their synagogue, “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.” When a man with an unclean spirit interrupted his teaching, and he healed him, the people were even more amazed and kept saying to one another, “What is this? A new teaching — with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.”

It certainly is a new teaching when you can command the unclean spirits and they obey you. I’ve had many teachers in public school, in college, and in seminary, but when it came to getting the students in their classes to be so motivated that we would question our old assumptions and be open to new teaching, new ways of understanding the world around us, only some of these teachers had the kind of authority needed to deal with students who had types of “unclean spirits,” especially the unclean spirit of a closed mind.

In today’s classrooms or synagogues or churches, you rarely if ever hear of people described as having unclean spirits. In some Bible translations, the term “demon” is used instead of “unclean spirit.” You don’t hear a lot of talk about people being possessed by demons either.

When you hear stories in the gospels about unclean spirits or demons, you probably wonder whether to take them literally or seriously or not take them at all. However, there is another option, and that is to attempt to understand what the gospel writers want you to learn with these stories of Jesus and his encounters with unclean spirits or demons. Then you can take that understanding and apply it to your life in the here and now.

The first thing to note about this story from Mark’s gospel is that the main theme is not unclean spirits. The key subject is Jesus and his teaching with power and authority. Being able to handle people with unclean spirits is evidence of that new teaching.

In Biblical language, to have an unclean spirit can mean one or both of two conditions. It can mean to be unclean ritually, which means the unclean spirit defiles you so that you are not permitted to participate in the worshiping community. You could have epilepsy or be disfigured or have some physical handicap. It can also mean that you are unclean morally, so that the unclean spirit causes you to do immoral acts. To be unclean in either way or in both ways is to be separated from God. Remember the old saying, “Cleanliness is next to godliness.”

The writers of the gospels named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John often write about unclean spirits or demons. They want you to know that in the coming of Jesus, the reign of God is at work and people are no longer to be separated from God. That separation has now been bridged. The power of unclean spirits or demons has been overcome.

The Apostle Paul proclaimed the same good news. In his letter to the Romans, he wrote: “Who shall separate us from the love of God? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all

creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." And that includes unclean spirits.

Let's examine more carefully this idea of unclean spirits. I believe this story from Mark's gospel is as relevant today as it was when it was first written. You might be puzzled by the term "unclean spirit," but think of it this way: You have known people who are controlled or possessed by some habit or addiction or emotion which is destructive to them personally and which separates them from others and from God. The same could be true of you. That's what the gospels mean by an unclean spirit or demon.

To have an addiction is to need whatever you are addicted to in order to have a sense of well-being. Any type of drug, alcohol, nicotine, and other substances, or a habit such as gambling, can become the organizing center of an individual's life. That's what it means to be addicted. In such cases, the term "unclean spirit" is a very descriptive metaphor. All that matters is where the next drink, or fix, or high is coming from. People who are addicted rob convenience stores, banks, and individuals to obtain the money needed to support their habit. They neglect their work, their families, and their own health. They lie to themselves about the power of the addiction in their lives. They have been taken over by an unclean spirit.

But do not define an unclean spirit too narrowly. You can be possessed by the unclean spirit of greed, envy, pride, anger, lust, gluttony, or sloth. In case you don't recognize this list of unclean spirits, they are traditionally known as the "seven deadly sins."

You could also be addicted to an overpowering obsession, which is another kind of unclean spirit. Human beings can be obsessed with all kinds of things — work, golf, sex, money, social status, power, the internet, cell phones, iPods, gambling, maybe even Nebraska football. Some obsessions are more harmful than others. There are many varieties of unclean spirits, and dealing with them can be more a part of your experience than you realize.

The story from Mark's gospel does not describe what kind of unclean spirit Jesus was dealing with. I have my own theory as to what kind it was, and I will describe it later. It's important to know what kind of unclean spirit or spirits you might have. Only then can you begin to overcome it. It's important to remember that the power of God as revealed in Jesus has authority over every kind of unclean spirit, and that power is available to you. That's the new teaching in this story.

You also need to remember that some unclean spirits are easier to recognize than others. For example, the unclean spirit of greed has taken over many lives in today's world. Yet it's not always easy to identify. It can be subtle. You can give it another name. You can convince yourself you need something instead of wanting it. Luxuries can easily be disguised as necessities.

The unclean spirit of "racism" is also difficult to recognize because you can hide it, excuse it, or deny it.

One of the most difficult unclean spirits to discern is that deadly one named "sloth." I am convinced that "sloth" was the name of the unclean spirit that possessed the man in this story from Mark's gospel. The other unclean spirits that are named in the seven deadly sins are more straightforward and recognizable. Sloth seems harmless and almost archaic. It doesn't appear to be deadly. In the animal world, a sloth is a creature that hangs upside down in trees and sleeps most of the time.

It's helpful to remember that the Greek word from which "sloth" is translated into English is "acedia," which means, "I DON'T CARE." It is apathy. It's the ability to look at a starving child with a swollen stomach and say, "It's not my child," or to look at a lonely man in a nursing home with his head drooping on his chest and think, "It's not my dad." The unclean spirit of sloth is to lack compassion. It is coldness of spirit.

It is too easy to think of sloth as mere laziness or procrastination. The unclean spirit of sloth is not about deciding one morning that you will roll over and go back to sleep. Those who are possessed by the unclean spirit of sloth have lost their drive to do anything meaningful or good with their lives. Their favorite expressions are: "So what!" or "I couldn't care less."

Boredom is a symptom of the unclean spirit of sloth. Did you know that the concept of boredom was not known until recent times? How can it be that you live in a society that has technologically accomplished so much, revels in luxury, possesses so many play-toys, and yet boredom is so prevalent? Why is a young person in the United States playing with thousands of dollars' worth of cell phones more bored than a young person in Africa who does not have such equipment?

"I'm already bored," says a student in June, after the first week when school is out. A student says he does not enjoy math because it is boring. Some people leave their marriages because they are bored. All of these are signs of the unclean spirit of sloth at work.

Here's why I'm convinced that the man in this story found in Mark's gospel was possessed with the unclean spirit of sloth. He quickly recognized who Jesus was. I'm also convinced that he wanted to be rid of this unclean spirit. That's why he came to the synagogue. In the story, he said to Jesus, "I know who you are — the Holy One of God." He recognized the new teaching that Jesus represented. It was that teaching with authority that could heal him.

At the same time, he wasn't sure he wanted to be healed. He said, "Stay away from me because I know you have the power to get rid of my unclean spirit." No one likes to give up his or her unclean spirit. It's always a struggle. Whatever your unclean spirit is, be careful, for you can come to think of it as an ally rather than a spirit that is keeping you from living a more meaningful life.

In calling the unclean spirit out of this man, Jesus was helping someone who had become so wrapped up in himself that he did not care enough to try to make a difference in anyone's life. Someone once said, "There is no smaller package in this world than a person who is all wrapped up in himself."

Another reason I am convinced that this man was under the control of the unclean spirit of sloth is that of all the seven deadly sins, sloth is the most explicitly religious in character. The other six have religious connections but are also recognized as being evil without any necessary religious assumptions. You can define envy, pride, greed, lust, gluttony, and anger without any reference to God.

Jesus taught that the greatest and most important commandment of all is to "love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself." The person possessed by the unclean spirit of sloth has difficulty doing this because all of his or her time is taken up worrying about himself or herself.

The unclean spirit of sloth can cause you to avoid your obligations when they demand effort and sacrifice — not because you are evil, but because you can't see the big picture, and you fail to understand what a difference you can make in this world if you would only stop worrying about your own aches and pains long enough to do something that might make you forget them.

How can you get rid of the unclean spirit of sloth? The first step is to admit you have a problem, an unclean spirit like sloth. The man in this story from Mark's gospel did that. As I noted earlier, he knew he had a problem — that's why he was in the synagogue, a place he was not expected to be.

Then he took the second crucial step. He recognized that he needed a power greater than himself to help him with his unclean spirit, and he sensed that Jesus had the needed authority to do this.

The third step in this new teaching is that the loving energy of God is most often available to you in the same way it was available to the man in this story — through Jesus' authority and through your faith in that power.

That's the new teaching in this story. The loving energy of God as revealed in Jesus has authority over whatever possesses you or anyone — obsessions, addictions, or anything that has taken control of your life and which therefore prevents you from being your true self, the person God intends you to be — a person with compassion, one who loves God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and loves your neighbor as yourself.

Here's another part of this new teaching. If you are convinced that you have any kind of unclean spirit, any condition that is holding you back, do this: Today, do something good — something that takes you out of yourself, something that is good whether or not anyone notices what you are doing, something for which you do not expect credit or praise — and be happy about that and that alone. Amen.