

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
January 28, 2018
Epiphany 4B 2018/RIC Sunday
Mark 1: 21-28

Last Sunday, Vicar Tamika talked about how fast-paced the Gospel of Mark is. One of Mark's favorite words is *euthys*—which my seminary Greek teacher connected to my last name—and which makes it one of a small number of Greek words I still remember. *Euthys* best translates as “immediately”. In our short Gospel reading, Mark uses *euthys* 3 times—but somehow it got lost in translation.

The point of all this Greek trivia is that Mark wants us to feel the urgency around what Jesus is doing. This is not a gentle, test the waters, kind of roll out.

The disciples have just been recruited by Jesus—they follow him *immediately*. They don't go to a Jesus seminar or a two-week training. They don't even get an orientation.

Immediately, they go to Capernaum. Jesus goes into the synagogue—and at the first opportunity--the Sabbath—he starts teaching. In the middle of his teaching, he casts out an unclean spirit.

This is the first public act of Jesus's ministry. In each of the gospels, the first public act is different—and in each case, it gives us a picture of who Jesus is for the Gospel writer. It's really important to pay attention to the first thing Jesus does in public.

This story can be a challenging one for us. Exorcism of demons isn't something we usually have in the middle of our sermons. A number of us have real trouble with the idea of demon possession because we have a scientific worldview that demons don't really fit into. I don't want to get stuck here—so try to set aside those questions, if you can, so we can look for the meaning in this story.

There's nothing about this story that is normal or conventional. Jesus didn't break any laws by teaching in the synagogue—any Jewish male could—but usually it was just the rabbi who taught. And it was way beyond normal to have the son of a craftsman—a carpenter—speak in public.

Jesus is not just asking a question of the rabbi or offering a comment—he's giving the sermon. So, everybody's thrown off balance. Before the man with the unclean spirit even comes in, people are wondering what the heck is going on because Jesus has stepped way out of the expected behavior zone.

There's something *new* about Jesus's teaching. And it seems to be as much about *how* he's teaching as what he's saying. The people who hear him say that what's different is he's *speaking with authority*.

Now, for us, when we say someone is speaking with authority, we mean that he knows what he's talking about. There's the confidence that you hear in someone's voice when they're an expert.

But "authority" in Jesus's time also carried with it the idea that the person with authority *has the power to make things happen*.

So, the people listening to Jesus recognize his authority—and *immediately* that authority is challenged. Immediately, a man with an unclean spirit comes in and that spirit challenges Jesus. And Jesus shows the power that comes with his authority by commanding the spirit to come out of the man. There's a struggle—it's not a peaceful leaving—but the spirit comes out of the man.

Understandably, the people in the synagogue—the crowds, the disciples—who witness this are affected by this demonstration of Jesus's authority. They are amazed and the rumor mill starts churning. Jesus has given them a lot to talk about.

But for the man who was possessed by the unclean spirit—and for his family—for the people who love him—the effect of Jesus's authority is life-changing. No longer is this man flailing around—out of control—hurting himself and others. No longer is he being driven by forces that seem to be outside of himself. He is back to being who he truly is—in his right mind, able to make choices, free.

For this man and his family, Jesus's authority, means they've got a whole new life.

Today is Reconciling in Christ Sunday—the day when we remember and celebrate our commitment to full welcome of people of different sexual orientations and gender identities. So, I'd like to bring this story of Jesus's new teaching with authority into conversation with what it means to welcome transgender people into our lives.

I think it's safe to say that men who are born knowing that they are really women, and women who are born knowing that they really men, is not new. What's new is that it has become public. Over the last few years, it has burst into all of our lives. It's like a new teaching.

We know of three people who have transitioned. We knew them in elementary school when we thought they were girls. But now they are living the truth of who they are as young men. Sarah asked me the other day what transgender was because one of her classmates parents is transitioning from male to female. Another pastor shared that he has a grandchild who is transitioning.

This new teaching is coming from people—who like Jesus—speak with authority. They speak with the authority of their own lives and there is power in that.

Those of us on the receiving end of this teaching might also be like the people who were listening to Jesus's new teaching. Here was a carpenter's son—speaking in public—stepping out

of his expected and conventional role. Usually people in Jesus's station in life keep quiet but Jesus is stepping out of that conventional norm—and the result is that all the people around him feel a little—or a lot—off balance. Their world is being shaken up.

Maybe those of us who have bodies that match our gender identities—whether we're gay or straight—maybe we feel like we've lost our footing. That even the concept of gender identity is so mind-bending we can't really get our heads and hearts around it. Being male or female seems so fundamental—and so linked to physical characteristics. What does it even mean to say that being male or female is something you know in your head rather than your body?

We might be wondering why we are talking about this in church. That puts us in the same story we've been exploring. Why did the man with the unclean spirit interrupt a perfectly fine synagogue service?

Oh, but wait, it wasn't a perfectly fine service—because Jesus had already interrupted it. He'd already upset the applecart. He'd already thrown everyone off balance by speaking with such authority.

And today, the truth is that people are already speaking about this in church. Most of the people who are speaking about this in church judge transgender people as “not normal” or even worse, as not real. In that framework, the unclean spirit would be in trans people—and the powerful authority of Jesus would be used to call out the unclean spirit that makes them believe that they are a gender that is different than their physical body.

But that's not the Jesus I know.

The Jesus I know contended with everything that denies full life to every person. The Jesus I know called out an unclean spirit that was destroying a man from the inside out—an unclean spirit that kept this man from really living.

So, today, maybe we can hear Jesus calling the unclean spirit—not out of transgender people but out of *us*. Jesus is calling out the confusion, the resistance. He's calling out the voices in us that say it's unnatural and not what God created. Jesus is calling out the parts of us that see the existence of transgender people as a problem we wish would go away—the parts of us that wish we didn't know anything about it.

Jesus is calling all of these unclean spirits out of us. And, Jesus has authority. Jesus has the power to get rid of the stuff in us that keeps us from loving as widely as he does.

That love and acceptance of transgender people—particularly of transgender youth—can be a matter of life and death. An astounding 40% of trans people attempt suicide. That statistic changes greatly for people who have support from family and friends. Transgender people who have support are 82% less likely to attempt suicide. Loving widely matters.

I feel a need to remind myself that it's not just because this is good for other people. Loving more widely is what makes us more fully human—it truly is what brings us more life.

I want you to hear that I am on this journey myself. I am someone who needs to grow in my embrace of trans people—I have not arrived.

As a part of preparing for today, I reached out to a parent of a young man who has transitioned. We have a connection that goes way back but the last time I spoke with her was a couple of years ago at a party. She shared a lot then about the beginning of the transition—and I'm sorry to say, I hadn't talked to her since. But I did this week—and what a gift it was to me.

It was an encounter with a kind of loving that is truly next level. Listening to her, honestly felt like an encounter with the Holy One of God. The first thing she said was, "He's still my child. There was never a question of pushing him away."

She talked about how she hadn't been in the space with him—and so it took a while for her to realize it was real. That it is a powerful thing to see him really become a guy with the hormone treatment. She said that she came to really feel good about the double mastectomy because she could see how uncomfortable it was to be bound up—on so many levels her child was set free.

And she also talked of mourning—of missing her daughter—but in the end of seeing how happy her son is—how he is relishing his true identity—and how that makes everything ok.

Loving taken to the next level—truly.

Jesus loves you and me right where we are. His love for us is next level—and in that love, he calls out all of the stuff that keeps us from being who we truly are—people who love to the next level.

Thanks be to God. Amen.