

## **When the Crazies Show Up at Church**

### **Mark 1:23-24 (Epiphany 4B)**

I have served seven churches in my ordained life, and it never fails. In every place I have ever ministered, just when things are beginning to go right, the crazies show up. Just when I am having an engaging conversation, some crazy person interrupts. Just when the committee has reached a spectacular decision, the crazy one jumps up to speak. Just when it looks like the entire congregation is happy, the crazies show up angry and upset.

It's the same way in other institutions besides churches. We ask ourselves, "How in the world did that crazy person get into this group?" We even find usually reasonable people suddenly acting crazy. It happens in our families. We ask the one we love, "Where did that crazy comment come from?"

A lot of folks give up on organizations because too many crazy people are there. A lot of folks have stopped attending church because too many crazies are there. Maybe some of you know someone who has stopped going to church for that reason. Just when things were going so right for you, some crazy person spoiled the whole thing.

We go to church to hear some word of comfort, some warm lesson of love; instead, we hear that crazy person hollering at us.

Well, well. The same thing happened to Jesus, just when he was starting his ministry. Just when things were starting to go right for him. It happened like this: Just after Jesus had gathered his most trustworthy disciples, he began his public ministry by going to the synagogue to teach. The people were duly astounded and impressed, but as soon as he began that ministry, the crazies showed up. Actually, they go by a number of different names, but in every gospel about Jesus, there appear people who are possessed by things.

In today's gospel, Mark, chapter 1, Mark says that a man with an unclean spirit appeared in the synagogue hollering, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of

Nazareth? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." The Bible sometimes calls these people possessed by a demon, for it says they have an unclean spirit.

Ever since the first century, we Christians have struggled to define just what these unclean spirits are, just what these persons under possession are. Some have ventured to say that these diseases were first-century attempts to define mental illness. Others have said that some supernatural power was at work, or that we should not "define away" demonic possession.

Whatever way we define these "unclean" spirits, or these types of possession, the gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to deal with them. Maybe Jesus would rather have talked about the hopes of his new ministry or about what love and justice and freedom are, but he was faced immediately by this man with an unclean spirit. Even today we would rather talk about a new ministry somewhere or about the upcoming Super Bowl, instead there is a story today about a man possessed with an unclean spirit.

Yes, there are people today, right in our churches, who are possessed. There are people in every healthy church who are somehow not quite right, who seem not to fit in, either at church or in society around us. They are not raving lunatics, of course. They are not drooling from the mouth. But they are possessed by things.

A proper analyst might conclude that they are obsessed or controlled by other spirits such as loneliness itself, or possessed by anger, or possessed by deep dissatisfaction or hurt, or driven by insecurity. They are fighting severe internal battles which we just cannot see at first glance from the outside.

Sometimes we call them crazy. Often, they are. And if the moment is right and we are with other people we trust, we will roll our eyes when mention is made of them. At other times, we become impatient with them.

You know what? Churches attract crazy people. Go by most any church during the weekdays, in case you don't see it on a proper Sunday. On any given day, we deal with craziness. It's mostly harmless, of course. Some people are imbalanced. Some

folks are angry. Almost always, people are lonely who are drawn to this place. Almost always, they get in the way of agendas and proper business practices.

But, friends, let me say that this phenomenon is not a bad thing. Every healthy church does attract crazy people. Look at the gospels themselves for confirmation. Look at Jesus' ministry itself. The first people to gather around Jesus in the Bible after he has called the disciples-the first people who are drawn to Jesus and fascinated by him-are the crazies, the people with unclean spirits, the folks seemingly possessed by demons.

We could regret that fact. We could complain and lament. Or like some churches, we could pretend that such folks do not exist. We could work around them. Or like many diseased churches, we could bend to their every wish; we could let them guide us; we could become possessed as they are possessed.

But the church fails in our mission if we let ourselves be taken captive by the possessed. Again, there are churches that do. They fret and worry about the folks with the loudest voices, who always ask the crazy question, or who are always yelling out like the man did to Jesus: "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?"

Jesus does an interesting thing with the folks who are crazy. He neither ignores them nor becomes impatient with them. And he certainly does not allow himself to be taken captive by them. No, he speaks the truth with them. He ministers freedom to them.

Real ministry to the possessed does not mean bending and being shaped by their agendas or by trying to answer their boundless needs or trying to answer their boundless complaining. Ministry to the possessed means speaking a truth that comes from beyond this earthly realm. Ministry means being confident in the love and power which has brought us all to the church in the first place.

"Be silent and come out of him," Jesus said to the man possessed by an unclean spirit. "And," the Gospel of Mark says, "the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, did come out of him. They were all amazed."

Yes, this is the powerful ministry of Jesus. Jesus meets the disease and possession of this world and delivers us from that possession.

In fact, Jesus delivers us. Why were we, any of us, first attracted to Jesus? When did we first make that internal observation that we needed what Jesus had? Have we ever made that first internal observation that we need what Jesus has?

The first truth is that we are all possessed at some point, at some level of our lives- especially those of us who call other people "crazy." Each of us has some bondage which keeps us away from freedom and release, which keeps us from enjoying life and the world and each other in the way God has designed for us. Each of us can be driven crazy by a sense of being possessed by something not quite right.

And it's why each of us comes to Jesus, even if we are not aware of it. We are all the crazies. We are all here. We, too, need that first ministry of Jesus. We are attracted to Jesus because we recognize something in him that overwhelms us, something that will cleanse us with deep and loving truth.

The healthy church is where each of us can bring our craziness face to face with Jesus. The healthy church is where each of us can bring our madness to the love and holiness of Jesus.

And Jesus heals us. He needs only say the truth, speak the word. That word is a truth that goes beyond what most of us think is teaching. Jesus' teaching is not mere mental exercise, not learning a bunch of clever facts, not like the "scribes," the Bible says. Saint Paul would later say to the Corinthians, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." The people in the first century were amazed at Jesus' teaching because it had a deep authority, the authority to speak to their deepest needs and even to their most unclean possessions. Jesus had the authority of love.

And Jesus still speaks. He speaks to the crazies who will always show up around him. He speaks to the crazies who show up around us. He speaks to the crazy that is inside each of us. Today, we are face to face with the holiness of God, the truth of Jesus Christ. That holiness, that love, sets us free. Amen.