

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

Text: **Mark 1:21-28 (The Voice)**

Theme: ***Stepping UP: The Authority of Love***

“Jesus of Naz’reth went to Capernaum,
To the synagogue to teach,
People, astounded, at his wisdom
Saw his power all to reach.
Jesus of Naz’reth, as we pray,
Please teach us, reach us, we beseech you;
Visit your people with your power;
With your life, our lives renew.

Into the room there came a man
Whose ranting, crying stole the show;
What would Jesus tell the madman,
All the people sought to know.
Jesus of Naz’reth, are you able
To cast out, blast out demons today?
Your love saves us in each hour;
Come to us without delay!

Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit
While the people were amazed;
“He commands, and they obey him!”
Thus his name to all was praised.
Jesus of Naz’reth, we are yours,
We follow and hallow your will for peace;
You have called us to your purpose,
So your love may here increase.

God has called us to be faithful
In an age of fear and strife;
War and greed are now our demons,
But in Christ we have new life;
Jesus of Naz’reth, we your people
Now go, to show your gift of grace;
Give us courage you to follow,
That your church may all embrace!”

That’s a poem by the Reverend Scott L. Barton as he reflected on today’s scripture and this wild story that comes to us once again from Mark as we experience Jesus entering into his Calling full force.

As I reflected on this story this week, I couldn’t help but realize how Mark, our intrepid and immediate gospel writer, takes Jesus so quickly from the confirmation of His call –being baptized by John in the Jordan; to the opening of his Call -calling others to join with and follow him; to the

proclamation of his Call as he enters the temple and teaches as one with authority, speaking from his heart and casting out an unclean spirit in view of all those gathered. And we're still in chapter ONE!

To me, this is the journey of Jesus that He holds out to us to follow: Step Out, Step In, Step Up.

First, we must hear the call and give ourselves to it. Then we must go forth or STEP OUT with the call, then STEP IN and ask others to join us on the Call, and then we must STEP UP and OWN the call and, with love, speak from the authority contained within it.

For it is only by following Christ's path, listening for God's voice and believing in the love that is always there for us that we can step up and proclaim the good news that God is in charge and at work in our lives and in the lives of others.

To be faithful in the midst or "in the age of fear and strife" as Rev. Scott put it in his poem, means to walk through the fire and the fear and proclaim the Word God has put on your heart. By stepping up in this way, you help others deal with their own unclean spirit and find the truth and joy that come from being a follower of Christ.

But what IS this unclean spirit that Jesus so authoritatively casts out as the people in the temple look on agog?

For the thousands of commentators who have looked into this story and parsed its meaning, the unclean spirit can represent many things.

For D. Mark Davis, a scholar who delves into the original Greek contained in our lectionary passages each week in a tremendous blog he calls, "Left Behind and Loving It," this description of a man with an unclean spirit is a "powerful" one that separates persons with addictions from their addictions.

Quoting a recent article by Johann Hari on *The Huffington Post*, and in reference to this besieged character in our story today, he asserts the adage, "It's not you. It's your cage..."

I find the gospels to be very perceptive in their language about persons with demons, acknowledging demonization is part of the person's reality, but not the person himself," he writes; and indicates that he's translating the Greek and the implied subject of "'cried out' as 'it' and not as 'he' ... attributing the voice to the unclean spirit, in which the man is caged, as opposed to the man himself."

Can you hear the love in that statement? I think this kind of love that separates the person from the affliction is the true kind of authority that Jesus brings to all humanity. Throughout the gospels we see Jesus looking past the problem and seeing the soul instead of the sin - calling out and culling away that which blocks the light and the love within.

This is the same authority Jesus gives to us, as he asks us to see the beloved child of God in ourselves and in each other, even though the cloud of an unclean spirit may be blocking the light.

But how do we get there? How in the world do we get past our own aggravations, annoyances, grievances, addictions and uncleanness to see the beauty and the rightness and the spotlessness that God sees in each one of us?

There is a moment in the new movie, "Selma" that absolutely blew my mind when I saw it. So, I'm sorry if you haven't seen it yet, but I just have to share this moment with you. It IS history, you know, so you already know what happened, and I'm not really spoiling anything...right? :<)

In this particular scene, the young Martin is leading thousands of people over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. (This bridge, consequently, as I found out in my research this week, was named after a Confederate General and subsequent Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan.) Here we see Martin Luther Jr. leading his people over this bridge, cemented in hatred and named for one of their oppressors, for a second time. The first time they had tried to cross it, they were attacked by the police - beaten and gassed and driven from the bridge on what would become known as "Bloody Sunday."

But in this scene, on their second crossing, they are now surrounded by more than 2000 people, including clergy from many different denominations and faith traditions. Slowly, they march as one body moving forward as they and we see the state troopers awaiting them on the other side.

Sitting there in the theatre, the tension is palpable, and, having not brushed up on my history, I'm anxiously awaiting and wondering what's going to happen.

I THOUGHT I was about to experience one of those classic triumphant movie moments. You know, the good guys and gals all arm-in-arm finally crossing that bridge together this time and, with the music swelling, making their way to Montgomery as "We Shall Overcome" slowly builds from a single voice into thousands.

And, indeed, it looks as though their way is clear as the troopers step back and seem to be allowing them to pass. But right in the middle of the bridge Martin stops, and all the people behind him stop as well.

And then, in the tense moments that follow, with all attention riveted on the young minister, Martin Luther King does something so strange and what must have seemed so unexpected from all those gathered (as it did to me) - he kneels down right there on the bridge, and bows his head in prayer.

A bit bewildered, but trusting nonetheless, the people beside and behind him all kneel as well in a kind of human wave that travels down the bridge until all the marchers are kneeling instead of marching.

And when Martin finally gets up, and the rest rise to their feet as well, he does something so surprising... he turns around and starts to make his way through the crowd, leading them back across the bridge instead of forward and over it.

My companion and I discussed this particular scene for quite a while afterwards wondering what it meant and what we thought was going on in Dr. King's head.

To me, it was the most significant sign that Dr. King truly sought out and was led by God. When he didn't know what to do in the moment; when he wondered if going forward and through the way seemingly held open by the troopers was the best thing to do, he knew he had to turn to his ultimate authority by going within and then stepping up and stepping out with the answer he got, even when it meant looking foolish or crazy in the eyes of others. I mean, you just know his ego and his pride wanted so much to lead that band forward.

This, I believe, is what Jesus did throughout his life and encourages all of us to do even now. Take it to our God in prayer.

Kneel in Gethsemane. Kneel on the bridge. Seek the wisdom of the Christ. This is what it means to listen deeply for our higher authority and to trust the voice we hear, conveyed to us in love

and through love, knowing that we will be guided through the storm and into the very best for our lives and the lives of those around us.

This is how we step up. This is how we live out our call. This is how we claim the authority of Christ to identify the unclean spirits as those things that separate us from seeing the Christ within each other and within ourselves.

Through stepping up, stepping in and stepping out in love, WE can claim the loving authority that is always there awaiting us, healing us, and bringing us back to the One.

Amen.