

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

Jesus, in our gospel reading today, is attending synagogue, where he taught with authority or we could say he spoke powerfully. It was common in those times for rabbis to quote other rabbis, not to speak for themselves. It would be like me referring to a commentary. However Jesus spoke for himself, not referring to other rabbis. The demon in the man recognized who Jesus was and challenged him, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Notice, Jesus did not approach the man to heal him, the demon recognized Jesus and called him out.

It's possible the demon named Jesus to try to get the upper hand because there is power in a name. One of the pastors at our group study this week whose name is Kathleen related what happened to her in third grade. There were several Kathys in the class so to make it easier on herself the teacher called Kathleen "Kathy". When Kathleen didn't respond because she did not recognize that name, the teacher yelled at her for not responding. She stood up for herself saying, "That isn't my name, my name is Kathleen." Each time this happened Kathleen would end up either in the hall or in the principle's office. The teacher was exerting her power over Kathleen by using a name, just as the demon was trying to exert power over Jesus. But Jesus held fast to his authority and used his power to exorcise the demon from the man. Jesus used his power to transform this man from a demon-possessed man to a healthy man. Wherever Jesus power intrudes there is transformation.

We seldom hear of exorcisms in our culture, (although there was recently another exorcist movie out), but that doesn't mean that people are not being transformed through the power of Jesus. However, people, us included, choose what evil they will hold on to. Sometimes it is in what a person believes. Many years ago, there was a belief that there is power in the pyramid shape, and people would construct pyramids maybe out of paper or paper mâché and hang them so they were suspended over the person's chair or bed in order to enhance the human powers of thought or concentration. More recently people have held the belief crystals are imbued with powers. You may have seen them hanging from rear-view mirrors or placed on a shelf close to where the person sits. Crystals supposedly have healing power, and also the power to harmonize one's body, mind and soul. I think you can see how this belief clashes with the commandment of idols and placing something above God as belief in the power of pyramids or crystals gives power to inanimate objects, power that only belongs to God.

If pyramids and crystals are too new age for you, what about the thought some in our society have that we, as humans, are enough in and of ourselves, that we don't need God to make it through this life? How many people suffer because they choose to believe having faith is a weakness, that belief in God is superstition, and they have what it needs to get through anything on their own. Martin Luther got it right when he wrote: "For not only the adoration of images is idolatry but also trust in one's own righteousness, works, and merits, and putting confidence in riches and human power. ... .. How godless do you think it is to rely on these things and to reject confidence in the eternal and omnipotent God?"

I'm not saying it is wrong to be self-assured, I am saying it is wrong to take that self-assurance to a level where God is excluded. It may seem as though the apostle Paul was very self-assured, but actually, he was God-assured. He could make the claims he made only because he knew that he was doing God's work in spreading the good news of Jesus.

In the days of Paul there were many physical idols in public places, and it was considered that one was a good member of the community when they engaged in public ceremonies which glorified the idol and sacrificed food to it. When a person became Christian and decided not to glorify the idols and engage in the festivals, they were no longer considered good members of society. I think we see that today when we decide to no longer go along with friends when they are making jokes that ridicule particular members of society, or if we stand up for a group that is being persecuted. We stand out because we don't think the same as some of the powerful people in society. However, we don't have to worry about eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Neither did the person of Paul's time who was eating the meat that was sacrificed to idols when they did not imbue it with the meaning of the sacrifice. It's like decorating with crystals, if you think they are pretty and give them no power, there's nothing wrong with having them around.

But some of the people who once participated in the idol sacrifice still had trouble separating the meat from the idol and it weakened the faith they had in Jesus. This person was not someone who simply objected to the practice, but one who was in danger of falling into sin.

For example, let's say there are two 1st-century Christians named Marcus and Timothy. Both are former idolaters, now saved by faith in Christ. Marcus shuns everything to do with his old way of life, including the meat sold in the marketplace, because, for him, eating such meat would mean that he was returning to idol worship. Timothy avoids the idol's temple and refuses to participate in the pagan festivals, but he has no problem eating the meat from the market. Timothy correctly understands that an idol has no power to corrupt good meat, and, for him, eating such meat is a non-issue. Then one day, as both men are in the marketplace, Marcus sees Timothy eating meat that was sacrificed to idols. Marcus is horrified, but Timothy laughs it off and encourages Marcus to eat some, too. When Marcus hesitates, Timothy cuts off a piece and hands it to him. Marcus—emboldened by Timothy's confidence—eats the meat. Biblically, both believers have sinned. Timothy sinned by violating the conscience of a fellow believer. Marcus sinned in that he essentially returned to idolatry—at least, that's what his conscience is telling him. More importantly, Marcus is learning how to ignore his conscience—a very dangerous thing to learn. Under no circumstances, Paul says, should a believer encourage another believer to violate his conscience.

The principle here is that the conscience of a weaker Christian is more important than individual freedom. Doing something "permitted" should never hinder the spiritual health of someone else. We should be willing to lay down our personal rights for the sake of maintaining unity in the body of Christ. The problem for Paul in the letter to the Corinthians doesn't seem to be the choice, but what the choice does — alienates the church from Christ. The risk is that the person will fall back into non-life-giving ways of living. And we should never allow something to come between us and God.

That's where the transforming power of Jesus comes into play. God shows grace when giving us good gifts such as food. It is a reality of a fallen world that the greatest blessings often bring their own unique trials. These troubles reflect the reality of sin, not God's nature. God shows mercy when forgiving us for our mistakes and giving us the chance to try again. God is perfect when it comes to being gracious and merciful to us. God is good and holy. All glory be to God.