

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, January 28, 2018 // Epiphany 4, Year B

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## The Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

## Background and general observations

*Immediately after calling the first disciples, Jesus enters the synagogue to teach. Thus, it could be said that his first act of public ministry in Mark's Gospel is in this story. Jesus is beginning with the religious structures of his day, ministering within accepted religious customs (Sabbath, local synagogue). The dominant theme here is the way in which Jesus teaches, "for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." This raises good questions for us to ponder concerning the nature of authority.*

*We also see here a stark contrast between Jesus and the man with an unclean spirit. The Holy One (Jesus), on the holy day (Sabbath), in the holy place (synagogue), meets the unclean one. For those concerned about ritual purity in Jesus' day, the presence of an unclean person like this can have the effect of defiling a place. Jesus does not seem fazed by this encounter, however. This has led some to question what sort of person would not be welcome in their own churches. One writer recommends sitting in a mall or a public park and watching people pass by—which of these, do you think, would not be welcome in our church?*

*Perhaps also relevant to us, as we consider this story, is a conclusion reached by one modern New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, who said, after studying early Christian art, "the essential Jesus was known primarily for his feeding people and healing them." (The Essential Jesus)*

*It has been pointed out that demons identify who Jesus is, and his enemies recognize his power. However, especially in Mark, those closest to Jesus seem to have trouble recognizing the extent of Jesus' power and coming to terms with who he is. At the end of Mark's Gospel, the centurion correctly identifies Jesus as "God's Son," after watching Jesus suffer and die. Could it be that Mark wants the reader to understand Jesus' true identity not through Jesus' miracles but through the example of Jesus' suffering and death? Instead of seeking signs and miracles, perhaps we are to be drawn more to Jesus' offering of himself.*

## Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. At the center of this lesson is the question of authority. Of course, the scribes had a particular kind of authority: they were acknowledged scholars whose authority came from a detailed understanding of Scripture and Tradition. But Jesus' authority is different; his seems to come from within. Perhaps we could say that Jesus' authority does not come from his having information *about* God, but that Jesus' authority comes from a union *with* God, a knowledge of God. The scribes' authority was in a sense derivative while Jesus' knowledge, and thus his teaching, was from union with the Source.

What, if anything, might this say about sources of authority in your own life? Perhaps it is our human nature to desire knowledge and correctness of thought, to seek affirmation, but this may somehow impede our spiritual growth and our abilities to imagine, to wonder, and to question. If you reflect on your spiritual journey, are you able to notice when you were concerned with attaining information about God and when you were seeking deeper union with God? How has the difference between knowledge *about* and knowledge *of* influenced the way you worship, the way you pray, the way you think about the Divine?

Consider a couple of different kinds of authority: a policeman has an official kind of authority; Mother Teresa has a different kind of authority. How would you describe the difference? Where does Mother Teresa's authority come from? Who are the people in your life, whether or not they have any worldly power, whom you would identify as having the deepest kind of authority?

2. Consider how Jesus never seems to be worried about fraternizing with "unclean" people, or disruptive and disreputable people. What do you think this says about Jesus and the example he seeks to set? How is this evidence of his ability to feed people and to heal them? Do you know others who act this way? What would be the cost and reward if you were to model your own life in this way?
3. Now, consider what kind of presence you are in the lives of people around you. What sort of authority do you think you have in the lives of others? What kind of authority would you *like* to have, and what changes have to take place in order for that to happen?
4. What are some of the unclean spirits inhabiting people today? Is there a kind of unclean spirit inhabiting *you*? What are some of the spiritual diseases that infect us?

What are people seeking from their attendance at church or their encounter with God in Jesus? And those who stay away from church—what are they avoiding, or what might they be fearing? Perhaps you, too, have experienced a season in which you did not feel welcome or at home in church. How can we be agents of feeding and healing for one another, especially those with an unclean spirit? Who has been an agent of healing for you, and how did it happen?

5. "They were all amazed" at what they witnessed of Jesus in the synagogue. Are people so deeply amazed today by Jesus or by the church? Or, are people just interested? mildly curious? unimpressed? bored? Are you able to describe a time when you have been astounded? What is an experience that amazed you? What would it take for people to be amazed and astounded by Jesus and his Body, the church?