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SAVE A LIFE—BE A TEACHER

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Mark 1:21-28

Ministers in the United Church of Christ are ordained to the Office of Pastor and Teacher. I know that the ‘pastor’ part of the title is familiar to you, but I don’t know if you knew about the ‘teacher’ part. Not a lot of ordained ministers use it much themselves.

At a clergy meeting not too long ago, we were going around the room introducing ourselves. Everyone was saying ho-hum things like, “I’m the senior minister of Second Church,” and “I serve West Street Congregational.” And so there was much eye-rolling when one guy up front announced, “I am Pastor and Teacher of such-and-such-a-church.” It sounded pretentious. But he was right, and that is what we are, Dan and I—Pastors and Teachers.

The reason that the UCC gives ministers this dual title is what I call ‘cocktail party information.’ It will interest you, but it will not save you. Therefore we can talk about it some other time. Today I want to talk about teaching because it figures so prominently in our gospel story, and because this story has given me a lot to think about regarding my own vocation as a teacher.

Let’s turn to the story.

Right away the author, Mark, tells us that what is happening in the synagogue of Capernaum is no ordinary teaching. What grabs people’s attention in the story is the *way* Jesus teaches. It is fresh, unlike the second-hand pedantry of the scribes. It is immediate, grounded in experience, and it comes across with an authority that is utterly convincing to them. Mark doesn’t even bother to reveal the content of Jesus’ teaching that day. He is only interested in conveying the *compelling quality* of the teaching. It is, as we heard in the reading, compelling even to demons.

Imagine the scene. Capernaum is a very small town, and people know each other well. The men, including Jesus, gather in *shul* together to study, as they do every sabbath. Nothing seems amiss at the start. But unbeknownst to any of them, there is a man in the room who suffers from an “unclean spirit.”

Who knew? When the story begins, he is not drooling or flailing around. He is sitting there with them in the pews, we might say, reading, listening, discussing—right up until the moment when something that Jesus says, or something in the way he says it, prompts a big reaction.

The murky, messy thing that has control of the man’s inner life rears up. It talks back, and it is terrified. It acknowledges that Jesus is Lord and that he has dominion over everything. Jesus will decide whether it stays or goes. And it is going for sure.

In the person of Jesus, the dehumanizing power of evil meets God’s re-humanizing will head on, and God wins. We are meant to be assured that God *always* wins. “Be silent! Come out of him!” Jesus commands. And when the catharsis is accomplished, the convulsive shrieking dies down, and the bedeviled man is free, the dazed spectators ask, “What is this?” They answer their own question: “A new teaching—with *authority!*”

Over the last few days, I have found myself pondering the power of God’s word when it is spoken with real authority. I’ve been thinking about fresh, immediate teaching, the kind that makes people sit up, recognize themselves, see a truth, find a way, take heart, and be delivered of their demons.

Inevitably I’ve also been wondering about my own preaching, and asking myself whether I should be concerned that the only shrieking you hear in this sanctuary on Sunday mornings usually comes from the babies—and not because they are possessed by demons, no matter what their exasperated parents think.

I wonder about this because on any given Sunday, the odds are very good that someone among the many who come to worship and learn here, including me, is possessed of something murky, something messy that has us in a vise grip and makes it hard for us to be authentically ourselves. On any given Sunday, people come in here needing their spirits lifted—those heavy spirits that have us chained up to hurt, unforgiveness, guilt, or unrelenting anger.

On any given Sunday, a world of pain comes with us through the doors and sits down with us in the pews. Tell me, you who have kids, live within a twenty mile

radius of Arlington, and read the papers—aren't you possessed this morning by the horror and waste of a young man's self-destruction? Aren't you sitting here this morning, with Cameron' O'Connor's family on your mind—and your own family in front of your eyes as well—trying to fend off a temptation to hopelessness?

Spirits of fear and pain and paralysis. Murky spirit of confusion and aimlessness. Heavy spirits of worry and grief. All these and more inhabit us. They sit here every week. And they keep so quiet and behave so appropriately that you'd never know they were behind you or beside you or up front here with us, or over there in the choir with you. Nothing seems amiss.

If there were a fresh word spoken here, I have asked myself this week, a teaching that was not stale and second-hand, but alive and authoritative with the power that comes from experience, at some point in the service wouldn't you expect to get a rise out of one of these spirits? Wouldn't there be a little more commotion in the hall? Why aren't our demons skyrocketing out of here by the dozens every week?

I thought a lot about these questions. And I came up with a couple of replies. Here they are. See what you think.

First, not every liberation or healing is a Cecil B. DeMille production. When demons are ousted from the nether regions of Congregationalist souls, for example, they know better than to kick up a lot of drama. They save that for Pentecostals. Salvation seems to be a less raucous affair in our tribe, but that is not to say that you cannot hear how the sweet the sound of amazing grace is at First Church in Cambridge.

Dan and I know a lot about the quieter advances God's Spirit is making here week by week as we share with you the word that God has given us. From time to time you tell us about the ways in which something we said struck you as new. You tell us that a message reached you, speaking powerfully and authoritatively to your inertia or fear or anxiety or guilt or other debilitating and murky spirits from which you need deliverance.

It never ceases to astound us that for at least one person, on most Sundays, a word we thought went nowhere in fact hit home. Words we don't even remember saying get played back to us months, even years later as decisive words, words you cherish. Somehow they rekindled your faith and your hope. This is the gift, the mystery, and the privilege of the pulpit. And it is the undeserved, unsought

reward for every effort we make to speak not with our own authority and cleverness, but with confidence born of obedience to the gospel.

Most pastors I know take this privilege with utmost seriousness. Faithfully, we spend hours and hours each week sitting with the holy texts in study and meditation. We beg for the help of the Spirit. We pray for the congregation. We struggle for a good word to say on behalf of God and the gospel. A word that rises from the integrity and immediacy of our own daily walk with Jesus Christ. A word of authority that by grace and art might loosen the grip of any unclean spirit that is making us in any way an alien to our own precious humanity.

The result of all this effort may be sermons that are bombshells, or sermons that are duds—it is not up to us whether they ‘work,’ when all is said and done. We learn eventually to let go of the hope that by arresting, authoritative, and fresh teachings we will extract screaming demons from the placid-looking woman in the penultimate pew. What we do hope for in the end is to have been at least honest—transparent to God, to the scriptures, and to you—and that our hard-won honesty will somehow be, by God’s grace, a *tikkun olam*, a repairing, restoring blessing for you and for the world.

So, why are there not more shrieking unclean spirits departing us every Sunday morning? My first answer is that there are in fact quite a large number leaving us all the time. They just go more quietly.

The second answer faces us with a serious challenge. And as is the case with great challenges, it offers us also a great opportunity, the opportunity to reclaim one of the most important dimensions of the Christian life.

Here is what I mean—

If we look only to the teaching of the Pastors and Teachers of our community for help in freeing us from the murky things that alienate us from our own humanity, we will shortchange the church and the world. There will never be enough of us clergy-types to do the job. But more important than that, the fact is that it isn’t our job alone to do. A minister’s calling to teach is but a special instance of the charge that Jesus gave to *all* his disciples. You call and pay us to carry out the teaching task with a particular kind of responsibility and dedication. But there is a bigger picture—all Christians are ordained by baptism to tell the story and announce the good news. You have a calling to be teachers too!

You are called to ponder the story of God and to tell it, each from your own angle, out of your own experience, with the peculiar accents you give to it because of your contexts and histories. And if you *all* did so faithfully, who knows which of us in here or out there might be freed at last from some old demon by your fresh, authoritative, grounded word of grateful testimony?

I know that I have been moved and changed and edified—literally built up in faith, hope and love—by the teachings of many people in this congregation. I have been privileged to hear from you countless stories of life and faith. Stories of the ways that God is working in your lives; stories about the grace you bring into the world by your faithfulness as parents and professionals and friends and citizens; stories of hope breaking through despair and lives wondrously remade; stories about the aspirations of your hearts and minds and willing hands.

Dan and I hear most of these stories because of our pastoral roles. You tell us in confidence. But I want you all to know that most of what we hear really and truly does not require a security clearance. There is no reason to keep it secret—and every reason not to! If it edifies tough nuts like us, imagine what sharing these stories of faith of ours—and we all have them—might do for our congregation! And then for our world! Imagine the power for good of fresh words, born of real experience, and spoken by people who most of the time also (thank God!) practice what they preach!

Perhaps you already do this sort of story-telling, this everyday teaching and preaching. Perhaps you would rather die first. Perhaps you just don't know how to do it. Perhaps you are ready to learn. Perhaps your readiness can be accommodated! Here's a long-term heads-up—in the fall, we plan to focus our adult faith formation sessions on the practice of testimony, the grateful art of sharing our faith and telling the story of God. There will be plenty of room for everyone in those sessions, and it is putting it mildly when I say that it is vital that we all take part. Remember that TV ad sponsored by one of the national educational associations? It said simply, "Save a Life. Be a teacher."

God's truth on the boob tube! Who knew?

Teach, dear congregation, as only you can. You have been called to this ministry! Be responsive to your calling! Tell the story fresh from your own life as it has never been told before. Cast out by the authority of your words all the spirits that keep us from ourselves, from each other and from God.

Teach! The life you save may be mine. The demon you cast out will probably be Dan's. (Just kidding. He doesn't have any.) The good we do together will surely be God's.