

Nathan Brown
 “What Have You To Do With Us, Jesus?”
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 West Side Christian Church

Mark 1:21-28

“What have you to do with us, Jesus?” Believe it or not, the same question I ask of the text I am going to preach on each week is the same question asked by the man with an unclean spirit in our reading this morning. “What have you to do with us, Jesus?” I am not sure what that says about your minister....

Therefore, upon hearing this man ask of Jesus this question, I could not help but reflect on what happens in the act of preaching. What is the purpose of me or anyone else standing up in this pulpit and interpreting a passage from scripture week in and week out? What is the purpose of us asking that question, “What have you to do with us, Jesus?” What has this passage to do with my life? How is Jesus being revealed in this scripture reading? What might God be trying to say to me in this text?

Well, it may not get us off to a very good start in answering any of these questions with the confession I am about to make. That confession is this: I don't know how to preach. I've been trying with all of you for almost four years now and I know less about how to preach a sermon now, than when I began.

I've learned: When it comes to sermons, people don't really listen anymore. There are too many obstacles to successful communication. We are tired. We have too much on our mind. We are skeptical. We have ADD. We are used to being communicated to through multi-sensory stimuli. We are sinful.

Each week, I work on a sermon, do my homework. Then I stand up here and thrash about for 15 minutes. Tell some nice stories. Gesture with my hands. But I see it in your faces...in your expressions....in your closed eyes. You don't really hear what I say.

So, I don't know how to preach. I have learned that it is just about impossible to get people to *get* a sermon. There are just too many obstacles, too many things that separate the pulpit from the pew—that separate us from God's Word.¹

Of course, hearing God's Word through preaching is only one way we reflect on this question, “What have you to do with us, Jesus?” We ask this question in Bible study, in conversation with one another, in our own prayer lives. We encounter God in a number of different ways and in those moments we try to interpret what God is teaching us, telling us, or showing us.

¹ Willimon, William. *Pulpit Resource*. Inver Grove Heights: Logos Productions, 2009. February 1, 2009.

So, just as there are various ways we encounter Jesus, there are also various obstacles, various unclean Spirits that we carry around with us, separating us from being able to answer the fundamental question, “What have you to do with us Jesus?” beyond those that do not allow us to hear a sermon in worship on Sunday morning.

It could be a feeling. Perhaps it’s guilt. Maybe it’s anger. What about fear? It could be a prejudice. Perhaps racism, sexism, or ageism. Or maybe it’s an addiction. Alcoholism, Greed, Pornography.

Brian Stofreggen writes that there are two different kinds of illness. There is biomedical and sociocultural. The biomedical perspective emphasizes the diseases and cures of individuals. However, the sociocultural perspective takes into account relationships with other people.

For instance, this man with the unclean spirit, according to Jewish law, did not really have a biomedical problem as much as he did a sociocultural problem – his unclean spirit compromised communal integrity and holiness. It separated him from the community and from God.²

Jesus is never as concerned with the biomedical as much as he is the sociocultural. Jesus heals in order to restore relationship and community. Jesus’ ministry is about taking away obstacles, about reconciliation, so that we might love one another. But if this is Jesus’ ministry, why do there seem to be still, so many obstacles, so many unclean spirits in our lives, so many sociocultural separations?

The fact is, we all carry a number of unclean spirits around with us that do not allow for us to understand who Jesus is and what he is calling us to in our lives. These unclean spirits make it difficult for *us* to answer that question, “What have you to do with us, Jesus?”

But, do you remember how Jesus answers the question of the man with the unclean spirit, “What have you to do with us, Jesus?” Do you remember how *he* answers that question? Jesus exorcises the demon from him. He heals the man. *Jesus* removes the obstacle. *He* extinguishes that which separates this unclean man from Jesus.

At our leadership retreat a couple of weekends ago, I told the group about the preaching problem I mentioned earlier and said that actually, the most frustrating thing about preaching is that on the weeks I spend hours and hours laboring over a sermon and get up in this pulpit ready to change your lives with *my* words, you greet me on the way out with phrases like, “interesting thoughts this morning, preacher,” and “see you next Sunday.”

However, in the weeks that consume me, perhaps I have had too many meetings, a funeral, and other personal happenings...I just didn’t have the time *I* wanted to work on the sermon, I walk up into this pulpit thinking to myself, “I cannot believe I am going to

² Stofreggen, Brian. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark1x21.htm>

preach this, Lord I am putting this in your hands” you walk out and say to me things like, “Your sermon really changed me this morning,” or “Thank you for your words, they were exactly what I needed to hear.”

Sometimes you do hear. Every now and then you do understand. And I am reminded of a professor’s words from divinity school, “The Word of God is not manifest in the words that come from the preacher’s mouth. The Word of God is made manifest when those words are understood by God’s people and God’s people are transformed as a result.”

This is not the preacher’s doing. No minister really knows how to preach. We only know that when you are changed by what we say, it is Jesus who has pulled back the veil, removed the obstacle, exorcised the unclean spirit, so that we all might be transformed.

After reflecting on this passage this week, it came to me that the problem is not the question that we ask, but rather who we ask the question of. When we ask, “What have you to do with us, Jesus?” are we asking ourselves that question, or are we asking Jesus?

We all have those demons that lurk in the corners of our lives, that keep us from seeing, or hearing, or understanding Jesus. We try to battle those demons on our own. But our passage teaches us today that when we finally sit down to contemplate, to explore how *God* is working in our lives, to ask that question, not of ourselves, but of Jesus, “What have you to do with us, with me?” he answers by removing those barriers, by exorcising those obstacles, and showing us the way. When we place those unclean spirits in God’s hands, they are removed from our lives.

This year, the theme for our ministry is “Becoming Church Beyond Our Walls.” As we focus on the **Community** aspect of our statement of calling, we will be moving our ministry outside the confines of our building in order to build relationships with our neighbors, both old and new.

However, in order for us to be able to do this, it is going to be imperative that we not only come out from behind the physical bricks that separate us from our community, but also the figurative bricks that exist in our lives.

At the retreat a couple of weekends ago, during worship, we had a station where every individual was given the opportunity to write on a brick one thing that might be keeping them separated from the community, from someone else, or from God. They then taped these bricks to a backdrop, creating a symbolic wall.

After communion, each individual was then asked to remove their brick from the wall and take it home with them as a reminder of what they need to hand over to Christ in the next year. Communion served as a reminder that it is Jesus Christ that breaks down the walls in our lives. It is only God that can remove the barriers that we put up.

These bricks are just like unclean spirits. They represent those sociocultural separations that we safely stand behind. This year, may we reflect on what those barriers might be in our lives. Is it fear, complacency, comfort, anger, or bitterness?

Whatever it might be, may we be encouraged by today's passage not to try and remove them on our own. But may we go to Jesus directly and ask him, "What have you to do with us, Jesus?" so that he might again show us how to be reconciled to one another and, subsequently, to him.

Amen.