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Mark 1:21-34
4th Message
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OPENING THE DOORS

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Several years ago, a cultural observer noted that the United States had transitioned from a “front-porch society” to a “backyard society.” People were spending less time on front porches chatting with passers-by and more time in backyards hiding from them. Home builders were no longer constructing houses with porches. Instead, they were building bigger backyards.

I spent a two-month sabbatical last summer with my family in Bend, Ore. We rented an old house with a large front porch in a neighborhood that attracted constant foot traffic. We lingered on the porch throughout the day and entertained comments from numerous passersby. We even became fast friends with a real-estate agent who was selling the house next door. I surmised that people weren’t worried about crime much in Bend.

Of course good reasons to stay inside and lock your doors abound. You keep the bad guys out. And, it seems there are more bad guys out there these days. On the other hand, if you stay inside and lock your doors, you might keep the good guys out, too.

I wonder whether there’s a connection between our houses and our hearts. Are we so protective that we’re afraid to open the doors of our hearts? More specifically, are we afraid to open the doors of our hearts to Jesus? If so, are we dissatisfied with what feels like an overly protective way of life? In Mark 1:21-34, Jesus enters two buildings: a synagogue and a house. His powerful teaching and actions in those two places give us every reason to open our hearts to him.

Mark 1:21-34:

They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!” And Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet, and come out of him!” Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him. They were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He

commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.” Immediately the news about Him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee.

And immediately after they came out of the synagogue, they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever; and immediately they spoke to Jesus about her. And He came to her and raised her up, taking her by the hand, and the fever left her, and she waited on them.

When evening came, after the sun had set, they began bringing to Him all who were ill and those who were demon-possessed. And the whole city had gathered at the door. And He healed many who were ill with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and He was not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew who He was.(1)

Jesus teaches with authority

Having preached in the region of Galilee and summoned followers there, Jesus enters Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and teaches in its synagogue, a Jewish place of worship, on the Sabbath, the day of worship. Jesus’ teaching struck those who heard it as uniquely authoritative, in contradistinction to the scribes, teachers of the Jewish law. Mark is unconcerned with the content of the teaching or with what specifically struck hearers as authoritative. His point, simply, is to present Jesus as one whose authority was recognized. Jesus teaches with the authority of a prophet, as one who speaks for God.

Scribes are everywhere today, passing judgment on this issue and that. They’re politicians and journalists and experts in every field imaginable. You see their talking heads on the television and read their blogs on the internet. Many, no doubt, have good things to say and deserve a hearing. I listen to one scribe’s opinion and say, “That sounds good.” A second scribe’s opinion contradicts the first scribe and I say, “That sounds good, too.” A third scribe says, “God told me this,” and I say, “Well, maybe.” A fourth scribe speaks and I say, “You’re just telling people what they want to hear.” A fifth scribe says, “There’s really no such thing as truth,” and I say, “Enough!”

It’s confusing, isn’t it? Who do you believe? I suppose what I really need, though sometimes I’m not sure I want it, is a no-doubt-about-it word of truth: a word from God. I need the teaching of Jesus. I’m not sure I want it, though, because the scribes keep me entertained and provide me with a convenient excuse for remaining non-committal. I mean, if the experts can’t agree, who am I to say who is right? It’s much safer to sit back and watch them duke it out. One of the reasons I’m studying the Gospel of Mark is that I know I need to listen to the words of Jesus. I like many of the scribes, but I love Jesus. And I know that he speaks for God.

Listen to the teaching of Jesus. Hear him speak to you. See if his teaching doesn’t strike you as authoritative. See if his words don’t burn in your heart the way they burned in the hearts of the disciples who walked with him on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:32).

Believing the truth that Jesus teaches

Worship in the holy place is interrupted by an unholy presence, an unclean spirit. The first thing Jesus did after being declared the Son of God was to go into the wilderness to face Satan, the leader of all the unclean spirits. Now, one of Satan's spirits shows up to challenge Jesus with fighting words. Literally, the demon, speaking through a man it is influencing, uses the words, "What to you and to me?" a Hebrew idiom of conflict (2 Samuel 16:10, 19:22, Judges 11:12, 1 Kings 17:18).

The demon, boasting of secret intelligence-gathering capabilities, wants to put Jesus back on his heels. If one side in a conflict knows what the other side is up to, it has an advantage. Knowledge of one's enemy makes one better prepared for battle. The demon tells Jesus, in so many words, "I know who you are and what you're up to." The demon is trying to make Jesus think that he won't be able to do anything without Satan's being aware of it. The unholy spirit of Satan, puffing up its chest, wants the Holy One of God to believe that he's in over his head.

Jesus doesn't respond to the demon's saber-rattling with like posturing. He simply commands it to be quiet and come out of the man. The demon puts up a fight, throwing the man into convulsions, but its resistance fails. A simple command from the mouth of Jesus trumps the demon's secret knowledge. In the end, it doesn't matter what the demon knows. It has to shut up and get out.

We expected Jesus, based on John the Baptist's prophecy, to do mighty works (Mark 1:7). It is no accident that the first of these that Mark records involves vanquishing one of Satan's demons. Satan and his hordes have not only invaded the world, they've also invaded Israel, God's people. The presence of an unholy spirit on a holy day in a holy place is emblematic of Israel's problem. By casting out the demon, Jesus brings a tortured Israelite to a state of rest on the Sabbath, the day of rest. Jesus does for one man—vanquishing the presence of evil—what he wants to do for Israel and for the entire world. Yes, he has come to destroy the demons: "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). With a little skirmish in a synagogue by the sea, the battle is joined.

The Scriptures plainly teach that such beings as demons exist—unholy spirits that can convince humans to cooperate with evil plans. They are, quite simply, liars. They want to influence our thoughts so that we believe their lies. Nevertheless, they are no match for Jesus. Therefore, they are no match for us when we "put on the full armor of God" by believing the truth that Jesus teaches, both directly and through his apostles (Ephesians 6:10-20).

In Mark 1:1-13, Mark told us who Jesus is: the Son of God, the Jewish Messiah, God's final king. The demon professed knowledge of Jesus' identity. The awe-struck synagogue-goers, however, are left to wonder about him. As readers who have been let in on the secret, we wonder who in the story will figure it out and what will happen then. The first half of Mark's gospel leads up to a question that Jesus himself asks of his disciples regarding his identity: "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29) The answer to the question marks a turning point in the story. Shortly thereafter, Jesus would leave Galilee to face his destiny in Jerusalem.

Jesus' mastery over the demon strengthens the synagogue-goers' earlier assertion regarding the authority of Jesus. Jesus not only teaches with authority, he also acts with authority. Here is a man who speaks for God. Mark reports in verses 22 and 27 that the synagogue-goers were "amazed." Is their amazement positive or negative? Are they hopeful or fearful? The demons, for example, have every reason to be fearful. They have no interest in obeying Jesus, but it looks as if they have no choice. If he teaches with

authority and commands demons, some in the synagogue may be wondering, “What authority does he have to command me?” Whether you’re amazed by Jesus in a positive or negative way depends on whether you’re interested in submitting to him.

Some years ago, before preaching as a guest at a church, a woman in the congregation asked me, “How do I know you will tell me the truth?”

“You don’t,” I answered. “You should see if what I say agrees with the word of God. If it doesn’t, don’t listen to me.”

After I finished, the woman approached me and, like those in the synagogue of Capernaum, said she was “amazed.” She was amazed because I taught from the word of God, deferring to it as the source of truth. Then she said, “Now I want to follow Jesus.” I just taught what Jesus taught—from the Gospel of Mark, as a matter of fact. I surmise that she was amazed by the authority of Jesus and wanted to submit to him.

Jesus “went into” a village in Galilee, but news of him literally “went out” into all parts of Galilee. Such publicity would prove to be a more powerful obstacle to his mission than the demon, which “came out of” the man.

First, Jesus entered a synagogue. After leaving the synagogue, he enters a house.

Jesus vanquishes demons and disease

Mark earlier reported that two pairs of brothers began following Jesus: Simon and Andrew, and James and John. Now, Jesus comes to the house of Simon and Andrew. In the synagogue, a demon’s words made Jesus aware of a man’s predicament. In the house, the words of Jesus’ followers make him aware of a woman’s predicament. If he did something for a man in the synagogue, his followers hope he can do something for a woman in the house.

Simon would be particularly concerned about his mother-in-law inasmuch as he was now following Jesus and wouldn’t be present to meet her needs. Is her fever, a serious matter in the ancient world, a sign that he was wrong to follow Jesus and that he should cut ties with him and stay home?

When Jesus cast out the demon, he spoke to it. When dealing with Simon’s mother-in-law, he takes her by the hand. In neither case does he resort to any elaborate ritual. We’re left to conclude that Jesus’ will, not his methodology, is determinative. So far, if Jesus wishes something to be so, it is so. Just as the demon left the man, the fever leaves the woman. There are no lingering effects of the fever, for Simon’s mother-in-law begins serving those in her house. Jesus not only masters a demon but also a disease. We’re starting to get the idea that Jesus has come to defeat anything that would despoil God’s good creation. And Simon gets the idea that his decision to follow Jesus was the right one.

God did not create this world as a domain for demons. Neither did he create it as an incubator of disease. When sin entered the world, it opened the door for demons and disease. Jesus came to vanquish both demons and disease from this world. No, he has not yet vanquished all disease, just as he has not yet vanquished all demons. His entry into the world—his life, death, and resurrection—means that demons and disease must submit to him. He is bringing, but he has not yet completely brought, all things into subjection under his feet. He will, for his perfect purposes, heal some people. He will also, for his perfect purposes, choose not to heal some people. That he vanquished a demon from a man and a disease from a woman demonstrates his mastery over demons and disease.

In faith, yes, we pray for healing. The challenge is to believe in Jesus' mastery even when he doesn't heal in response to our prayers of faith. The point of Mark 1:21-35 is not that Jesus vanquishes demons and disease; the point is that he has mastery over demons and disease. When he doesn't demonstrate his mastery here and now in ways that we would prefer, perhaps he is leading us to the deeper regions of faith, where appreciation for God's love grows in ways beyond understanding. Make no mistake, though: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ mean that demons and disease have no place in the world to come.

Although the sun goes down, Jesus' day isn't over. Word about his powers has circulated in Capernaum, so residents descend on Simon and Andrew's house. The whole city "gathered" at the house. The word translated "synagogue" (*sunagōgē*) is related to the word translated "gathered" (*episunagō*). Simon and Andrew's house, in essence, becomes a better synagogue. The synagogue becomes wherever people gather to Jesus. Jesus does for many in the evening what he did earlier in the day for Simon's mother-in-law and the man in the synagogue: he heals their diseases and he casts out their demons. He's not a one-shot wonder. Jesus not only casts out demons, he also silences them. They're all bark and no bite, and Jesus even takes their bark away from them.

All in all, it's been quite a day in the town of Capernaum.

Opening the doors of our hearts to Jesus

As individuals, what will we do with Jesus? The synagogue-goers were amazed by Jesus. The whole city gathered at the door of the house where he was staying. Crowds, though, are notoriously fickle. To keep wowing the crowds, you've got to keep the show going. From the perspective of the crowds, Jesus didn't keep the show going. In the end, a crowd turned on him. Even his closest friends abandoned him.

Most of us enjoy a good show. Moreover, if something is torturing us, we'd like it to stop. If we're sick, we want to get well. We'd love someone to help us. We'd love someone to walk into our hospitals and send everyone home. Would we, however, submit to that person and his teaching? Perhaps at first. But if we had to submit to every word he said and if he taught us to take up our crosses and follow him, we might want to pull back, as everyone did in Jesus' day.

Many in our day hail Jesus as a great teacher. They even incorporate some of his words into their philosophies. Mark, though, presents Jesus as one who speaks with the authority of God and demands our allegiance. It's one thing to appreciate certain parts of someone's teaching; it's quite another thing to bow before someone as Lord and submit to every word he says.

Why should we open our hearts to Jesus? First, and quite simply, we should do so because he is Lord. Second, we should open our hearts to him because of the kind of Lord he is. He heals our diseases and sends our demons packing. We are, of course, our own worst enemies. We cooperate with the demons and torture ourselves with thoughts. We enslave ourselves with fear, self-condemnation, and indulgence. We capitulate to disease and say that God has forsaken us because we're sick. Jesus, though, rescues us from the forces that enslave us. He penetrates the wounded places of our hearts and gives us what we really need: a faith that carries us through disappointment into a world with neither demons nor disease. That is, he does these things if we open our hearts to him.

To open your heart to Jesus, it helps if you first hear him knock. We often feel the knock of Jesus on the doors of our hearts when something affects us emotionally in a surprising way. The psalmists responded to such knocks by confessing and lamenting. They wrote and they prayed. When you write and pray, you put words to feelings. When you put words to feelings, you unlock the ache in your heart. Then you open your heart—you present what you've accessed—to Jesus.

Opening the doors of our church to Jesus

As a church, what will we do with Jesus? By all appearances, the synagogue of Capernaum was impotent. Its scribes didn't speak for God. Jesus, however, turned a house into a synagogue. Where Jesus is, there will you find his church. Where he speaks, there will you find his church. Where he heals, there will you find his church. In and of ourselves, we have no authority to speak for God. We have not the power to heal. Therefore, we will teach what Jesus teaches. We will ask him to heal us. As a church, we will submit to Jesus, and we will pray with all our hearts that people will find him here.

We will pray that people will join us not because they like the preaching, although we will endeavor to faithfully present the word of God. We will pray that people will join us not because they like the music, although we will make every effort to lead them to the throne of God. We will pray that people will join us because Jesus is here, because Jesus speaks here, because Jesus heals here. As a church, we know that we can lose sight of Jesus and become as impotent as Capernaum's synagogue. We know that it's quite possible to do church without Jesus and not even know that you're missing anything. We know that it's possible to believe more in your methodology than in Jesus. As a church, we will pray that God would help us see Jesus and submit to him so that we, too, might speak and act with the authority of God. We will pray that you find Jesus here.

I've heard some people say that they feel uncomfortable inviting unbelieving friends to our church because of the way we teach the Scriptures. I'd like to present an alternative view borne out of my own experience. I attended my first Bible study when I was 15. On the way to the church, my friends who invited me asked me what I knew about the Bible. I said, "Two things: there's an Old Testament and a New Testament." When we arrived at the church, the youth pastor said, "Open to Ephesians." I did not know what Ephesians was. The person next to me stuck a Bible in my hand and opened it to Ephesians for me. The pastor taught, and many in the youth group offered their own insights. I, on the other hand, was confused. I came knowing only two things about the Bible, but I left knowing two things about this group. First, although the Bible study confused me, I knew that something was happening among these people that was foreign to my experience. Looking back, I believe I sensed the presence of Jesus working in their lives. Second, I knew that these people took the Bible seriously. I came back the next week—and the week after that. Ten weeks later, I began following Jesus.

We take the Bible seriously here because we take Jesus seriously. If we take Jesus seriously, and we open the doors of our church to him, we should feel comfortable inviting others into our midst so that they might experience him, even if they don't understand everything that's happening. If the Spirit is working, what they don't understand will attract them, as it attracted me.

In any event, the church is not the building. The church is where the people of Jesus gather. The church therefore meets more often in our homes than in the church

building. Nothing special happened in the synagogue of Capernaum until Jesus showed up. When he entered the house of Simon and Andrew, though, he turned it into everything the synagogue was supposed to be. If you invite Jesus into your home, he will turn it into everything the church is supposed to be. If you give Jesus a place in your home and invite others into it, you'll be offering his healing to your guests. Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law; then she began serving Jesus, his companions, and presumably the whole town. She offered the healing that she received to the residents of her town.

Let's invite people into our homes—the sinners as well as the saints. Let's heed the word of God, which commands us to literally “pursue hospitality” (Romans 12:13). Get into the practice of inviting people over. However, don't try to change the whole structure of your life. Instead, incorporate hospitality into an easy rhythm. Consider starting out by setting aside one day a month for hospitality and then begin seeking out people to invite into your home. Prepare a simple meal—soup, salad, and bread—or order take-out.

Christina, my 4-year-old daughter, loves to eat at restaurants. I keep telling her that eating at home is better. When I've asked her why she prefers going out, she has told me, “Because I like it.” The last time I asked her, however, she was more revealing. Why does she prefer going out for dinner? “Because I like to see people.” I want my daughter to enjoy dinner at home; she wants to see people. What's the solution? Invite people into our home for dinner. Christina has never complained about eating at home when we've shared our table with guests.

If we share our homes with guests, we'll be sharing the love of Jesus with them.

The house up the hill

I spent parts of two summers as a short-term missionary in Bulgaria. I stayed in a Gypsy village and taught a church there. The Gypsy culture there was pagan, but some in the village were turning to Jesus. In turning to Jesus, many of them became aware of the presence of demons. Several of the believers approached me privately to tell me about their experience with demonic activity.

The church met for worship in an old school building at the bottom of a hill. It met for meals and fellowship—almost around the clock, it seemed—up the hill in the home of the pastor and his wife, Nicolai and Sonia. A constant stream of visitors, both believers and unbelievers, flowed through their home. At one point, I spotted two newcomers sitting by the door. With all the commotion, I hadn't seen them enter. I turned to one of my teammates and said, “When did those two get here?” He smiled and said, “Always room for two more.” People were feasting on the life of Jesus in that home. It was a modern-day version of Simon and Andrew's home. Sonia waited on people like Simon's mother-in-law. People gathered at the door. I stayed up with the Gypsies as long as I could each night, sometimes until midnight or 1 a.m. Yes, Jesus showed up at the church down the hill. But the house up the hill pulsed with his life.

Near the end of our stay, Sonia approached me with a concern. She told me that she had been experiencing an overwhelming sense of fear every time she entered her kitchen. I told her, “You serve God in your kitchen, Sonia, and it seems to me that Satan would want to keep you out of it.” I prayed for her in the name of Jesus that God would vanquish both her fears and any demonic influence that may have been contributing to them. When I returned to the village the next summer, I asked Sonia about her hospitality

ministry. “No more fear,” she told me. Jesus had raised her up, and the fever left her, just as the fever had left Simon’s mother-in-law.

We’re not Gypsies, nor do we all live in the same village. We inhabit a vastly different culture. Still, Jesus inhabits our culture as well, and he will give us ways to fulfill the command to pursue hospitality. So, what do we do? Sin opened the door for demons and disease, but we open the doors to Jesus. He teaches us and heals us. Therefore, we open the doors of our hearts, the doors of our church, and the doors of our homes to him. Then we open all the doors to visitors and let the party begin.

Notes

- (1) A They come into synagogue (21-22)
 - B Demonized man in synagogue (23-24)
 - C Jesus acts; demon leaves (25-26)
 - D News goes out to (literally) “whole” of Galilee (27-28)
- A’ They come into house (29)
 - B’ Sick woman in house (30)
 - C’ Jesus acts; fever leaves (31)
 - D’ Whole city comes to door (32-34)

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