You Are Worthy; Mark 1:21-28 (Epiphany 4B)
Second Presbyterian Church
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Today's scripture is Mark's first recording of Jesus' public teaching. Jesus has been baptized, spent some time contemplating in the wilderness, and called at least a few of his disciples. Now he travels to Capernaum and begins his controversial ministry. Listen to what the Spirit is saying from the first chapter of Mark:

Scripture

21 [Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. 22[The people] were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24and [the man] 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.' 25But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' 26And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27[The people] 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.' 28At once [Jesus'] fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Sermon:

What would it be like to be told something for your whole life and later learn that all that you had been told was a lie? To have a certain understanding and to later learn that it was all made up?

In the book *Born A Crime* by Trevor Noah, Noah, who was born in South Africa, talks about apartheid and what it was like to grow up under the rule of a government that mandated racial oppression. Noah writes…

The genius of apartheid was convincing people who were the overwhelming majority to turn on each other…You separate people into groups and make them hate one another so you can run them all.[1]

Noah continues…Apartheid was a police state, a system of surveillance and laws designed to keep black people under total control. A full compendium of those laws would run more than three thousand pages and weigh approximately ten

[1] Trevor Noah. *Born a Crime* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2016), 3.

pounds, but the general thrust of it should be easy enough for any American to understand. In America you had the forced removal of the native onto reservations coupled with slavery followed by segregation. Imagine all three of those things happening to the same group of people at the same time. That was apartheid.[2]

Noah is the offspring of a black South African woman and a white man of German and Swiss heritage who was living in South Africa. It was against the law for a white person and a black person to have sexual relations and just that act was punishable by 5 years in prison. The fact that Noah was born was an even more serious crime. His family had to hide him for fear that he would be taken from them and placed in an orphanage.

When Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, Trevor Noah was 6 years old. Apartheid ended and everything the government taught about racism and human value began to crumble. The dawn of a new understanding broke enabling those who had faced discrimination to have hope for a future where they suddenly had value in a new governmental system.

As Jesus begins his public ministry, as detailed by the gospel of Mark, he starts to change the rules that have been long established. Like those leaders in South Africa, the religious leaders of Jesus' day have carefully crafted the rules to suit their needs over time. They have used their knowledge to subjugate the people so that they can maintain power and authority over those who know less and have no authority.

The first bold move Jesus makes is to teach on the Sabbath. Mark tells us "…when the Sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught." It was against the law to do almost anything on the Sabbath, even to teach about God. Jesus quickly established that he was above human rules and that God could not be put in a box. The church leaders could not control God with their knowledge or their human authority.

For apartheid rule, the government leaders controlled the masses through educated mind control. Noah goes on to say…

The only way to make apartheid work, therefore, was to cripple the black mind. Under apartheid, the government built what became known as Bantu schools. Bantu schools taught no science, no history, no civics. They taught metrics and agriculture: how to count potatoes, how to pave roads, chop wood, till the soil. "It does not serve the Bantu to learn history and science because he is primitive," the government said. "This will only mislead him, showing him pastures in which he is not allowed to graze." To their credit, they were simply

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[2] Ibid. 13.

being honest. Why educate a slave? Why teach someone Latin when his only purpose is to dig holes in the ground?[3]

The black South African came to believe in his inferiority…to believe in the limitations imposed by others.

Jesus came to debunk the mind control about God, the lessons of inferiority taught by others, and the limits placed on our worth. This is especially clear when he confronts the man with the unclean spirit.

We do not know much about this man with an unclean spirit. We are not even told his name. Not only is he a nobody; he is an unclean nobody.

What do we know about him? Besides being unclean, there is one important thing we do know about him; the text tells us he recognizes Jesus.

Threaded throughout Mark is an interesting theme of who knows and recognizes Jesus and who doesn't recognize him. Many times Jesus' disciples don't even recognize Jesus or are confused about who he is. The flip side for Mark is that evil and unclean spirits often recognize Jesus immediately. The spirit in this story says, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." This unclean spirit recognizes Jesus' divinity and honors him by calling him a HOLY ONE."

To make things even more interesting, this unclean spirit was in the synagogue. Unclean people were not allowed to enter the synagogue, so this person who is unclean should never have been in the synagogue in the first place. I want to ask: was the man truly unclean? or did he feel unclean? or was he told that he was unclean? Convinced he was unclean?

Trevor Noah tells many stories in his book about how his skin color affected his life. He was a racial mix…a white father and a black mother. He had very pale skin. He was not considered black and he was certainly not white. The apartheid government labeled him "colored." This colored label was almost worse than being black in his society. When he was in school, he was ostracized by both black kids and white kids because he was neither one. He was left out of games, groups, and many societal interactions because he was colored. I bet he felt unclean, unworthy, unloved.

Jesus came to teach the unclean man and us a new way of being. Jesus says, the world may call you unclean, but you are not unclean to me. You may feel unclean or unlovable, but you are a precious child of God. I love you just the way you are, with all your imperfections. Jesus is different. He doesn't run away from evil or try to explain it or justify it. He banishes the evil, the unclean spirit and becomes one with us. He makes something new out of us.

How many times have you been told by the world that you are unclean, unworthy, unable to do what others can do? The unclean spirit inside us hangs

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[3] Ibid. 61.

onto the idea that we are not worthy of being loved. We are not worthy because of something we have done or not done, or the way we look or don't look. We can't possibly deserve God's goodness, God's grace. The unclean spirit in our story throws the man into convulsions and cries out with a loud voice before finally coming out of the man. It is so hard to let go of those ideas that we are not worthy of God's love and grace. We resist letting go of our perceived unworthiness despite needing to hear the news desperately.

The good news is that Jesus banished the evil spirit. Jesus said, "Be silent, and come out of him." By doing this, Jesus has given us the power over the evil spirits harbored in us. We have the power not only to rid ourselves of these evil spirits but to help others to rid themselves of evil as well. We have been given the authority to help others overcome evil that can take over and destroy us. No one is unworthy of God's love. We are called to share that good news that has been shared with us.

Believe it or not, Trevor Noah, who has gone on to do amazing things as a comedian—including hosting The Daily Show on Comedy Central--does not associate himself with either the political left or right. You may or may not agree with all he says politically, but I would consider him to be an example of a man who once had an ingrained unclean spirit. A spirit stoked by years of being told that he was not worthy. That evil spirit of his has been cast away and he is wildly successful as a comedian, and as one who tells people that skin color doesn't make you worthy or unworthy. Being worthy is about being yourself and we can all be loved as our true selves.

How might you and I be present in this world if we really believe that God loves us just as we are, no strings attached? How can that type of acceptance change us? Jesus didn't teach like the scribes. Jesus brought a new way of thinking and being in our world. Jesus has empowered us to live life knowing we are unconditionally loved by God. And in return, Jesus expects us to share that message with the whole world, no matter the color of one's skin, our marital status, where we were born, how much money we have in the bank, our political persuasion, or sexual orientation, or any other way we might try to classify or differentiate ourselves. Evil spirits be silent and come out!! You are worthy of God's amazing love.

In the name of God who is love, Jesus who casts out evil, and the Holy Spirit of freedom. Amen.