

We Met at Church

Mark 1:21-28

Introduction

A number of years ago, author Mitch Albom published a book titled "The Five People You Meet in Heaven." In it, we meet Eddie, a wounded war veteran, now an old man who has lived what he considers to be an uninspiring life. On his 83rd birthday, a tragic accident kills him, and he awakes in the afterlife. There he learns that heaven is not a destination. It's a place where your life is explained to you by five people, some of whom you knew, others who may have been strangers.

It is an interesting concept, but it is very bad theology. Just before He dies, Jesus tells His followers:

(Jesus speaking) I go to prepare a place for you. (John 14:2)

Other authors have tried to mimic that theme. One of them created his own list of the five people you will meet here on earth. His list consists of:

- Your soulmate
- Your mentor
- Your lover
- Your competitor
- Yourself

It's an interesting list. And it got me to thinking about other lists – books I could write ... like:

- The Five People You Meet at Planet Fitness
- The Five People You Meet at a Kid's Soccer Game
- The Five People You Meet at Church

I think Jesus could right that last one. And today's text might be the first chapter in that book. The setting for this encounter is a synagogue in the city of Capernaum.

(Jesus and His disciples) went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. (Mark 1:21)

A synagogue. Not the Temple. The Temple was in Jerusalem, and there was only one Temple. If the community of faith was large enough, it could have its own synagogue. The synagogue was a place for teaching and prayer. That's all that would happen in a synagogue service. No singing, no music of any kind, and certainly no sacrificing of animals. Just teaching and praying. Oh, and there was no permanent preacher or teacher.

When the people gathered in the synagogue on the Sabbath day, the designated leader of the worshipping community would select someone from those in attendance

to bring the message. So, if we followed that practice today, anyone of you could be called on to bring the Word of the Lord.

I have had that experience. In my days as a Conference Superintendent it happened to me on more than one occasion, especially if I was visiting a church southeast of here. It would be time for the sermon, and the pastor would come to pulpit and say "I see Brother Brodbeck in the congregation today. Let's welcome him now as he brings the message this morning." And that would be the first that I knew I was preaching that morning. I learned to always have a sermon tucked in the pages of my Bible whenever I traveled.

In today's passage, the leader of the synagogue called on Jesus. We don't know what His text was, but we do know that the congregation was impressed:

The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. (Mark 1:22)

Don't miss that word "authority." It shows up twice in this text. We will see it again in verse 27. And it is key to what happens next. Jesus has just concluded His sermon. He has proclaimed the Word of God with authority, when suddenly a man "cries out!"

Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out... (Mark 1:23)

Who are the five people Jesus met in church? Here is chapter #1. A demon possessed man.

Now frankly I find it fascinating that this demon-possessed man met Jesus in church. I don't have a lot of personal experience in these areas, but if I was a demon, I don't think I would be going to a church service – especially one where Jesus was preaching.

- Jesus will meet a lot of demon-possessed people over the three years of his earthly ministry. This is the only one that meets Him in church.

Can I suggest to you today that there are a lot of people in our world just like this man who was demon possessed? It may not be an actual demon, but something has ahold of them and won't let go.

These are people who are

- Caught in the middle of a deep, deep spiritual battle – a battle for their soul.
- Being pulled back and forth by the forces of evil within them and the faith that was just beyond their reach.

They are "captured" by an evil force that wants to hold tight to them. They know it is wrong. It is bad for them. They don't want it, but it holds on tight to them. It might be an addiction, an attitude, a set of circumstances, a deep cloud of depression or anxiety or grief. They long to be free, but that thing has a grip on them, and it is not easily resisted.

You have met those people: at the store, at work, in your neighborhood. You may have even met them at church. Maybe it's you.

Well, Jesus wants to meet them, too. Whether He meets them in the synagogue or on the streets, in the privacy of their own homes or in the public marketplace, He waits for them and He listens for them to “cry out” for Him. That's the story in this text.

He met Jesus because a deep spiritual battle within caused him to cry out.

And when he cried, here's what he said:

#1: JESUS, I KNOW WHO YOU ARE

Verse 24 reads:

I know who you are—the Holy One of God! (Mark 1:24)

On this particular Sabbath Day that demon heard Jesus proclaim the Word of God with authority and knew instantly it was in the presence of the Someone who was the complete opposite of it.

- The demon was evil, but this visiting preacher was holy.
- The demon was all about controlling people. Jesus came to set people free.

I wonder how many times this demon had been to the synagogue and remained anonymous.

- I wonder if anyone knew this neighbor of theirs was in the middle of such an intense spiritual battle.

That happens, you know. We people are quite skilled at hiding the demons that possess us.

- How often have you heard news about someone and thought “I had no idea.”
- That well-regarded coach who gets caught in an affair with a cheerleader.
- That man who opts for suicide just before the authorities subpoena his financial records.

We often miss the demons that possess those around us until it makes the headlines. Or the court news. Or the obituaries. We see that nice man that who sits in the pew ahead of us, that lady who sings in the choir. And we miss the struggle that is happening inside.

But there will come a day when that thing inside us – that thing that won't let go of us – will be brought face-to-face with Jesus Christ, and on that day there will be a second cry:

#2: JESUS, I KNOW WHAT YOU CAN DO

Also in verse 24:

What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?
(Mark 1:24)

The demon was no match for Jesus, and it knew it. It could control that poor man, but it had no authority over Jesus. Quite the opposite.

I told you that word was important. Authority. Jesus has authority over everything that possesses us, demonic or not.

The words that begin the Great Commission are often omitted when we quote those verses. Shame on us for doing that. Let me remind you what they say:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ... (Matthew 28:18-19a)

The demon didn't stand a chance. "Be quiet!" Jesus says. The words He uses quite literally mean "put a muzzle on it." The demon gave one last gallant effort, but had no choice but to leave. Because Jesus has the authority. And Jesus told it to leave.

In this world where the church and Christianity have moved into the background for a lot of people the authority of Jesus is often overlooked. We look for our answers to the struggles we face in a host of other things. We forget what the Virgin Mary clearly knew:

For with God nothing shall be impossible. (Luke 1:37)

It is a teaching that Jesus Himself will communicate with His followers:

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

Those things that control us don't need to control us anymore. Jesus is in the room.

- This is not a condemnation of doctors or 12 step programs or psychologists. Not at all. Use them. They are gifts from God.

But your ultimate trust is never in them. They don't have the authority of Christ.

APPLICATION

I found myself wishing that I knew this man's name, and that I knew what happened to him after that day.

- I thought "Wouldn't it be cool if he became the next ruler of that synagogue?"
- And ... maybe he becomes mayor of Capernaum in the next election.
- Or ... maybe he goes home and for the first time in a long time becomes an awesome dad and husband.

But then I thought, “No. The story isn’t about him.” The story is about what happens in the life of a person – any person – any anonymous person – who finds themselves caught in a spiritual battle in which they have no control. It’s the story of a man, a woman, a teenager, a child who in a moment of desperation simply cries out “Jesus!”

Is that you? As this story has unfolded today...

- Did you see yourself there in the church service, just like that man, hoping against hope that the ugly thing that possesses you could be unseen and unnoticed until the Benediction was pronounced?
- Are you caught in this vicious battle between the life of faith you want and the ugly life of sin that refuses to let you go?
- Then cry out! Jesus!

You may have been listening to my words today and thought “He’s describing my son, my daughter, my husband, my wife, my best friend...” Don’t lose hope. Jesus has authority over each of those things that grips them. Pray that they meet Him, that they come face to face with Him today.

Amen.