

**Sermon**  
**St. Mary Nanoose Bay**  
**January 28, 2018**  
**Mark 1:21-28**

How likely is it that we would ask for help or healing if we thought we were going to be judged or rejected?

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus heals someone. Mark tells us that when Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, there was a man with an unclean spirit there. This man obviously recognized Jesus because "he 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.'"

Think about it. Do you think it was a random thing that a man with an unclean just happened to be in the synagogue at that particular moment? Do you think this was a set up by God to showcase Jesus and what he could do in God's name? Or was this man was a regular attender of synagogue, who has been struggling with something – an addiction, mental illness or suffering from a secret that was eating him away inside - who until he meets up with hope, is unable to believe that he is worthy of help?

Is it possible that this man, recognizing Jesus' authority and where it comes from, cries out in longing, but also in doubt, because the power he recognizes in Jesus, is that power going to be used to destroy him? Does he perceive God as a punitive God?

And what does Jesus do? Instead of telling the man what God is like, through his action, by calling out the man's unclean spirit, he gives the message, "God is a loving God. God wants you to be free from all that binds you."

So in the face of holiness, something in this man reached out, maybe impulsively, maybe in desperation, but it sounds like in hope. Otherwise, why wouldn't he just have stayed quiet and suffered along in silence as he had been probably for a long time?

It's interesting that I've noticed that in all the gospel stories, Jesus doesn't heal people *until they reach out*. He doesn't go into a town and do a mass healing. He heals through relationship. People ask and he responds. People recognize his power, and dare to reach out in hope. And he doesn't let them down.

It seems to be that when we see our need for healing and come in humility to God, God moves to heal. If we don't see our need, or don't believe we are worthy, we hold back. And God doesn't seem to impose. God waits patiently..... or maybe *not so* patiently. Think of the story of the prodigal son, the father is waiting, looking out of the window, pining for his son, waiting to run and greet him, to embrace and welcome him home!

I've raised this point many times now in my sermons but I think it's worth repeating. How many of us love to help but have difficulty in receiving help? This precise dynamic can be what prevents us from asking for God's healing in our lives.

Let's take a moment here to unpack the phrase - an "unclean spirit." In our time, we like to find medical and physical and psychological reasons for all our ailments. We like rational explanations. But I invite you to think of a time when you've been in the grip of something that is not rational. An addiction is one example. But what about anger or jealousy? Can you remember how it feels to be emotionally completely out of control? Or maybe you have a seemingly irrational fear or a phobia that hampers your ability to live freely? And what about our minds? The thoughts that create a living hell for us. Where we judge ourselves harshly and put ourselves down and keep from reaching out and connecting with others? Yes, our thoughts can drive us crazy!

There may be reasons, even good ones, for why we behave the way we do, but the bottom line is the same. How do we free ourselves to be well, less self-centred, more open, and loving? Our intentions and will and positive thinking certainly can play a role, but as many people in recovery will tell you, you need a higher power. You can't do it on your own. You need to surrender to someone or something bigger than you are for the kind of healing that will truly and permanently set you free. It's too much to do and maintain on your own. You need a clean heart. You need to be changed from the inside out. And only divine power can do that.

Yes, we all have unclean spirits to some degree or another. And when we recognize that each of us has both what is holy and that which is not within us, it is possible for us to seek God. And in

trust ask for healing, mercy and grace. We are told to ask, and we will receive. We are told to knock, and the door will be opened. We offer up what is in us that does not serve life, and it will be transformed. This seems to be the divine way - to always be moving towards healing, light, and reconciliation.

Where we get confused and caught up, is in justifying our behaviour to ourselves and others; in hiding our fears and insecurities from ourselves and others; in confusing vulnerability with weakness and putting on a brave front that no one can penetrate; and, in confusing autonomy with not needing help.

Until we can clearly see our weaknesses and how we sin, or “miss the mark,” it’s difficult to ask for help, from God or our neighbours. And until we ask for help, it is very unlikely that help will be forthcoming. And when we don’t receive support when we need it, we often create the story that the world is an unfriendly place. Vulnerability is a difficult stance, yet it is in our vulnerability that we are able to truly connect with others, and allow them to touch us, help us, love us. The same is true of our relationship with God. It is our vulnerability, humility and need that makes it possible to be loved and healed.

The healing Jesus manifested happened in a public setting. Did the man feel safe in his community? Is that why he was there? The healing was done in full view. And so we hear about it 2,000 years later.

This morning we come together in our strength.... and our weakness. We will pray for each other, and for the world. We will eat together and be fed on a level that changes us in ways we will never fully understand. We will confess our weakness and failings together and be forgiven.

We are pretty vulnerable bunch in some ways. And so we take care not to hurt one another, not to judge one another, not to assume we know what's going on in each other's hearts.

We are gathered here in community and saying, "God, we need you. We need your love, forgiveness and grace to get through the week ahead. Please help us."

And each of us, in our way, offers up the things that keep our hearts from being clean and open. This is deep and humbling work we do here each Sunday, for ourselves and for each other.

And God is working in us, and through us. We know this in some way because we sing out our joy, our thanks, our hope. We share the peace we sometimes know, and always hope for. We pray when others can't find a way to; we hold each other up.

So in this place of worship, each Sunday, we engage with Jesus, we engage with our God. We share the stories from Jesus' time and from our own lives, and what happens here goes out into the world to touch the lives of those who are hungry to hear the good news.      *Amen.*