

*21They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22They 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 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." 25But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27They 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 his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*

Thursday morning. Marla came to the door of my office. "Could you come down to the women's Bible Study in the Lounge for a few minutes? They have a question they want to ask you."

"Sure," I answered.

On the way Marla told me what the question was. What does the Lutheran church teach about Satan? The women are studying Revelation – certainly there are many more references to Satan in that book than there are in the sermons they have been hearing from me and I suspect also from other ELCA pastors.

Well, as preachers are wont to do I gave an answer that was a lot longer and much less precise than what they had hoped for. They wanted me to speak with authority on the subject. But when I was done I doubt that any of them could have said what the Lutheran church teaches.

As you were listening carefully to this morning's gospel reading maybe a similar question came to mind. Jesus performed an exorcism. What about unclean spirits – demons? The first three gospels tell of people possessed by demons and of Jesus power over these evil spirits. Are there evil spirits at work now, among us? Or do the gospels reflect how the culture in which Jesus lived described various illnesses of body and mind that we would now treat with pharmaceuticals? You would like it if I could answer that question with certainty - authority. So would I.

For our gospel tells us that Jesus spoke with authority and not as the scribes. The scribes were the ones that were supposed to speak with authority. But Jesus did not repeat their same old lines. After the exorcism all the

people were amazed and kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.”

So what was it that the scribes would teach? My guess is that they taught all about God and Satan and about anything else that mattered in the religious sphere. My guess is that they had an answer for every question, an answer from scripture - a solid, certain answer - just the kind of answer I would like to be able to give to you.

But Jesus’ teaching was not like that. Jesus battles Satan but Jesus never teaches about Satan. Jesus calls upon God the Father – prays – pleads but he teaches very little of what God is like. Instead he calls fisherman to follow, he calls everyone to turn and believe the good news that God’s kingdom is near, God’s kingdom is now – today - as near as your believing.

For a man possessed by an unclean spirit God’s kingdom, God’s rule over his life was as near as Jesus’ presence. You and I could spend the rest of this sermon, the rest of this morning, even the rest of this day speculating about unclean spirits, demons – whether we might encounter them or not. You and I can speculate about the end times and Satan. We can talk about creation and evolution and the state of morality in the world today. We can talk about any number of things. But what will matter in your life, in mine, is what God is doing.

A man with an unclean spirit was freed, the spirit was cast out and the people marveled.

As we will read on we will see that some are unable to come to Jesus because they cannot walk – others will bring them. Some will come to Jesus in shame, afraid to face him directly but touching his robe secretly. But for all who come in faith and for those who are possessed by evil spirits, there is healing. Broken lives are made whole, broken bodies are restored - even the dead rise up at Jesus touch.

All the while I read I seek for a sign of what I must do - what I must tell you to do. But everywhere I see what God is doing through Jesus.

But again and again we witness people coming to Jesus – asking for help – healing – reaching out to touch Jesus and the healing of God flows through him. Jesus does not seek them out but gives them what they seek of him.

Jesus said: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers exercise authority over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you: but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus’ authority is love – service - giving himself.

And what about evil and its power in this world? I only know that Jesus’ power is greater.

