

## No Time to Dilly-Dally!

[Text - Mark 1:21-28]

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*IMMEDIATELY*, is a word that is used *repeatedly* throughout the Gospel of Mark. In the first chapter alone, Mark uses this word ten times, to describe the mission and method of Jesus:

“Immediately as Jesus came out of the water, the heavens opened-up....”

“Immediately, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness....”

“They immediately left their nets and followed Jesus.”

“Immediately, Jesus’ fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region.....”

The writer of *Mark* depicts Jesus as a man on an mission - a mission of teaching and healing; a mission of confronting and casting-out the forces of evil; a mission of raising up the oppressed and ushering in the Divine Realm. For Jesus, this is a mission of urgency and *immediacy*, one that can’t be delayed or diverted. Throughout Mark’s account, Jesus proclaims, “The time has come! The Divine Realm is at hand!” And then Jesus takes *immediate action* which reveals and reaffirms the reality of that Life-changing Realm.

This morning’s reading is a fairly short text, yet it contains a tremendous amount of information concerning who Jesus is and what his ministry is all about. As we look at this text, I’d like us to think about what it might say concerning us and our ministry. Now I readily admit, that today’s reading contains some language and imagery that seems rather primitive and a bit surreal. Nevertheless, I believe that we can still glean from this ancient text some fresh insights on how you and I might better understand and confront some of the complex challenges we encounter in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

“Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. The people were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” One of the critical challenges facing the modern Church, has to do with the problem of *authority*. In an age when many have felt betrayed by the church or by church leaders, it can be extremely difficult for any religious institution to recapture a semblance of genuine authority.

Now some faith-groups try to reassert their authority with a rigid *fundamentalism*, where every teaching is funneled through a narrow, legalistic interpretation of certain, select texts. In this way, religious leaders can claim to “speak for God” - even though their message is the complete opposite of the common understanding of Divine Love which is central to all major religious faiths. Jesus himself encounters this kind of inflexible religious leadership, and he *immediately* begins to challenge and change it. On that Sabbath in that synagogue, Jesus teaches with a remarkable *authority*, that makes people sit-up and take notice. And although Mark doesn't record what Jesus says, we can rightly surmise from his later teachings and from the end result of that visit to the synagogue, that Jesus proclaims the liberating power of Divine Love and Grace. His words bring excitement, joy and wonder to the people gathered there; and they even bring a back-handed compliment from an oppressive spirit that is present that day.

“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!” But Jesus is neither flattered nor flustered. He simply rebukes that spirit and says, “Be silent and come out of him!” Jesus comes to declare that the Divine Realm is at hand; and the time of oppressing God's vulnerable children is over!! So that spirit of oppression is driven from that man and from that synagogue. Then Mark writes that, “They were all *amazed!*” Well no kidding! That's some weird and wild stuff taking place in that sleepy little village of Capernaum! “And *immediately*, Jesus' fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region....” Well, no wonder! That wasn't your typical, every-day worship experience! Nor should it be; though there are some religious groups who expect to have some sort of *exorcism* every time they gather. They look for the devil under every rock and behind every problem; so quite naturally, they *find* the devil. However, they *miss* the point. Jesus doesn't go into that synagogue looking for the devil, or expecting to encounter an “unclean spirit.” He goes there to find and connect with his family of faith. He goes to teach about the gracious, life-changing power of Divine Love. Yet he isn't shocked, nor deterred, by encountering an oppressive spirit in a place of worship.

That corrupt spirit says, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” - which is another way of saying, “Mind your own business, Jesus of Nazareth! Go back to Nazareth where you belong and leave us alone.” But

Jesus says, “*This* is where I belong; this *is* my business! People are my business, and I have come to cast-out the damaging forces of fear and oppression that hold people captive. So shut-up, get-out, and stop harassing God’s cherished children!”

Jesus is a man on a mission! He comes to teach and to show that God is Love, and that the Divine Desire is that *all* people breathe-in that liberating, Life-changing power of Divine compassion and grace. And he is so passionately committed to this mission and message, that Jesus will confront and drive-out any powers or obstacles that would keep us from receiving and responding to that incredibly Good News; even if those obstacles happen to be found within our own religious institutions. Jesus Christ not only comes to set *individuals* free from their personal oppressions, but also to break the chains of any religious or political power-structure that oppresses or mistreats *anyone*. Jesus possesses a passionate fire for the dignity of all people; and he refuses to be discouraged or diverted by anyone or anything that seeks to diminish the Divine declaration of *every* person’s value and worth.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus gets into a lot of hot water for performing acts of healing and compassion on the Sabbath; for eating and drinking with “sinners and tax collector” - and for challenging a religious system that seeks to exclude *any* of God’s children. Yet today, there are still people within Christ’s Church who essentially cry-out, “Mind your own business, Jesus of Nazareth! Go back to Nazareth - go back to the First Century and leave us alone, so we can keep our judgmental prejudices; so that we can excuse immoral behavior when it’s politically convenient; so that we can continue to cling to our own personal hatreds and fears.” Yet in spite of people’s most obstinate resistance, the determined and compassionate Christ keeps on coming. Even the nails of a cross, and the seal of a tomb, cannot stop the undying, Divine Love which Jesus Christ embodies and conveys.

*That* is the crucial message of the Gospel - the Good News that Jesus brings. And when you and I truly believe that Good News, it will stir our hearts and inspire our lives.

It will set us free from our *own* prejudices and fears;

It will release within us a spirit of compassion, and a sense of our own authority to speak-out and act-up on behalf of others.

And most of all, it will move us forward with a Divine urgency and joy, to share this Good News with everyone we encounter - effectively and immediately!