



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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As One With Authority

*Sermon preached at eleven o'clock service, January 28, 2018
The Forth Sunday after the Epiphany—Based on Mark 1:21-28*

In today's gospel, from the first chapter of the oldest and most terse gospel, Jesus is on his very first day on the job. It's his first day. The very first day of his public ministry. He's already been baptized in the Jordan River, already spent 40 days of fasting and prayer in the wilderness to prepare, already called Simon and Andrew and James and John to be his disciples. Now he heads for the synagogue at Capernaum, his base camp in the region, to begin his work with the people.

Going to a synagogue to teach wasn't unusual; any adult Jewish male would have had the right to do it. But it's the reception Jesus received at the synagogue that makes the event significant. The author of Mark's gospel says the congregation "was astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one with authority, and not as the scribes."ⁱ

Not as the scribes? Not as the scribes. They would have been citing references and offering reasoned interpretations. They're the ones who wrote the official documents and served as the attorneys. The scribes would have been cool and academic and prepared for the day. But Jesus—Jesus is doing something entirely different here. Jesus is teaching out of his own authority. Jesus is teaching out of who he is, his own self-empowerment; and the congregation is "astounded."

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. On his first day. Isn't that always the way it goes? Everything's going perfectly fine and then, on your first day, a demon-possessed man...

And so in Mark's gospel, the very first public act of Christ's ministry is an exorcism. Now please note: the man with the unclean spirit isn't on the outside of the synagogue; he's on the inside. He's not one of them. He's one of us. He's in the community; and before we have too much fun with that fact, let's not forget that belief in demons and their power was a real and very ordinary part of life in the Ancient Near East.

Fr. Morton Kelsey, of blessed memory, claims it's hard for us moderns to believe in any form of spiritual healing because of our tacit acceptance of a worldview which allows no place for a breakthrough of "divine power" into the space-time world."ⁱⁱ It's hard to really believe in exorcisms because we don't really believe any evil power can possess us, and we're not entirely sure any spiritual power for good can save us, either. Theologian Walter Wink writes, "Our society is possessed. Christians as much as anyone. We are possessed by violence, possessed by sex, possessed by money, possessed by drugs. We need to recover forms of collective exorcism as effective as was the early Christian baptism's renunciation of "the devil and all his works."ⁱⁱⁱ

We can't say one judgmental word about a demon-possessed man because we, too, struggle with our own demons in their modern and hyper-developed forms. There's a New Yorker cartoon I love. It features a father sitting in an armchair, showing a dollar bill to his young child. He says, "This is money. Get ready to worry about it for the rest of your life."^{iv}

And it feels that way sometimes, doesn't it? We worry about money all the time. It's a modern form of demonic possession. We're anxious about our salaries, anxious about our bonuses, anxious about the market, anxious about the new tax laws, anxious about our bills, anxious about our charitable giving; anxious about tuitions, anxious about long-term care insurance. We may even be anxious about being so anxious all the time.

It was the American writer William Arthur Ward who observed, "Each of us will one day be judged by our standard of life, not by our standard of living; by our measure of giving, not by our measure of wealth; by our simple goodness, not by our seeming greatness."^v

Remember the old classic *Silas Marner*^{vi} by George Eliot? I read this book back in college. I pulled it off the shelf a few years ago, and it spoke to me in a way it never had before. Silas Marner is a funny-looking linen weaver living a lonely life in a cottage far away from the nearest village. He's come to this outpost because the love of his life left him after he was wrongly accused of stealing from the church where they worshiped. Silas is heart-broken. He feels abandoned by God, and he's utterly convinced of the basic inability on the part of human beings to be decent to one another, let alone to be kind or compassionate.

So he throws himself into his weaving and discovers the gold he receives for his labor becomes an end unto itself. He has no pleasures outside his work. He has no family life to distract him. Every night, after a small dinner, he pulls his bags of gold from beneath the floorboards of his cottage and pours them out onto his table. And for a moment he's mesmerized by the gold medallions, which seem to illumine his poor cottage. The people of the town think he's strange, weird, and maybe even dangerous. No one draws near to him. No one befriends him, and he offers little opportunity for any such friendship to form. As the years go by, Silas becomes lonelier and lonelier and more entranced by the gold coins growing beneath his floorboards—wealth which, over time, can offer him neither light nor warmth.

Then one day Silas returns to his cottage and discovers all of his gold is missing! Someone has stolen his most precious possession. He is adrift. There is no consoling him, because if that's all you have, then that's all you are. Silas is inconsolable, but in his tragedy, he tells and retells his woeful tale of having had his treasure stolen. Gradually the people of the village begin to open their hearts to him. They realize he isn't someone to fear or to envy, but a human being deserving of their empathy. Silas becomes, in the villagers' eyes, someone who really *needs* their help.

Not long after the theft occurs, a young mother falls dead in the snow near his cottage, and her infant child crawls through the snow to his doorway. The child crosses the threshold and warms herself by his fire, and when the old weaver sees the child, he sees it as a sign from God. He immediately decides to raise the girl on his own, no matter what the locals might say.

The beautiful child's golden locks parallel his lost treasure, now suddenly restored in a new and glorious way. The child grows up to be a joy, and as she grows into an adult, Silas grows into a very changed human being. I trust it won't keep anyone from reading this great classic to hear that his lost fortune is eventually restored and that his daughter marries well and lives happily ever after.

What would have happened had he not been robbed of his precious treasure? What would have happened if he had not recognized a different authority? What can we say? Silas arrived at his destiny. He found his fulfillment. He became whole again. He became fully integrated. He was born again. He was resuscitated. He was resurrected. He was transfigured. Silas Marner was transformed!

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.

So, who holds the authority in our lives? In your life? Do your possessions own you, possess you? Or, do you recognize a different authority? My deepest hope for us is to experience what Silas Marner experienced: the ineffable joy people of faith have experienced by letting go of their possessions.

- ❖ I wouldn't want you to give to this church because you've been "guilt-ed" into it, even though just a little guilt wouldn't be entirely out of order given the ways in which some of us have prioritized our giving.
- ❖ I wouldn't want you to make a pledge to this church because we need it, even if that's an absolute truth.
- ❖ That reminds me of the old story of the Sunday School teacher who is teaching a class on honesty, and she asks her young students, "Do you know where little boys

go if they don't put their money in the collection plate?" "Yes, ma'am," blurted out one of the boys. "They go to the movies."

- ❖ I pray we will give to this church because we've looked deeply into your own lives and discovered what I believe to be true: that virtually everything we have and everything we are is a pure gift from God. I pray we will give generously to this church because, in giving to support this ministry, we will be expressing our deepest and most profound appreciation for God and God's infinite glory.
- ❖ I pray you will give to this church, not because you can "help us out," but because giving lavishly to this church will help you become the generous person you have always wanted to be.

Today can be a new day. A first day for all of us. A day full of possibility and new beginnings. A day to acknowledge the one who teaches with authority and loves us in ways we can never fully comprehend. Today can be a brand, new day.

Amen.

ⁱ **The Gospel According to Mark**, NRSV, Chapter 1:22

ⁱⁱ Morton Kelsey, *Synthesis*, January, Epiphany 4, Postscript.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Wink, **Engaging the Powers**, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press c. 1992 p. 333

^{iv} David Sipress, Cartoons from **The New Yorker**, 2018 Calendar, c. 2017

^v William Arthur Ward "Thoughts of a Christian Optimist: The Words of William Arthur Ward," 1968.

^{vi} George Eliot, **Silas Marner**, England Books, London, reissued, c. 2003 (first published, 1861)