

Whose Voice?

The editor of the Presbyterian magazine Outlook has recently changed. Rev. Jill Duffield has accepted a call to return to a pulpit and active congregational ministry. Her role as editor has been assumed by Rev. Dr. Roger Gench who has continued her practice of offering thoughts on the lectionary passages for the coming week on Mondays. Dr. Gench opened his commentary this week with a question which came from his thoughts on the Mark passage. It certainly was an interesting question to contemplate, so I am going to simply put it out there. "If Jesus were to wander into church with you on Sunday, what do you imagine would happen?" Because that is exactly the scene that the passage from Mark is describing. Jesus and those he has just called to follow him as he has wandered along the seashore have entered the village of Capernaum. We are not given the day of the week that Jesus has issued this call, but it is now the Sabbath and Jesus enters the local synagogue. In the period before the destruction of the Temple, the faithful of the villages would gather in the synagogue and whoever could read, or who knew the Torah would select a scroll and it would be read. This was not exactly what happened when Jesus entered. Jesus entered and he taught. In both the NIV and NRSV which I read, one of Mark's favorite words in the Greek is left out...the Greek documents say "immediately he was teaching." Throughout each of the narratives of Jesus' ministry there are two conclusions that can be drawn about his habits...he was found teaching in the synagogues on Sabbaths, even when his other activities of healing there did not meet with the approval of the religious authorities of the time...and he was found ministering to those who needed healing no matter the time or place. Mark's narrative begins "immediately" with this event that occurs in a synagogue but the focus and tenor of this first detailed event is quite different from that of the other two synoptic gospels. Each gospel account, included the gospel of John, begins with the description of a different event within Jesus' ministry...even if that narrative will at some point include it. In Matthew's gospel, the Jesus' actual ministry begins with a brief paragraph saying that Jesus spends time teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news, and curing every sickness without giving any details before launching into the Sermon on the Mount which presents a summary of his teachings before giving any details of specific actions. Luke narrates that Jesus begins teaching in synagogues, then has him proclaim his mission to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed from the Isaiah scroll before he even calls disciples or records a single event. The common thread before each synoptic narrative begins is that Jesus is to proclaiming; is teaching a message but the power and compelling nature of the message unfolds slower. Only Mark, with his sense of urgency and his usual brevity gives us as an introduction to Jesus' ministry such a specific event...and the event is the casting out of an unclean spirit...or as Rev. Gench describes it...a demon. Dr. Gench goes on in his commentary to wonder if Jesus would find demons in residence if he joined us in our worship; if a fight would break out upon hearing his teachings.

Dr. Gench uses this opening and a comparison of the differences in the openings of the other gospels to point out that Mark begins his gospel with the presentation of a confrontation. In Mark, Jesus begins his ministry in a cosmic confrontation with the demonic forces that distort and oppress human life. Usually when this text is considered the focus is on the reaction of the majority of the congregation who are in the synagogue when Jesus begins teaching. "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." The scribes were those in the village who could read the scrolls, those who could interpret what was written there, those who could pass on what had been told them. Those present to hear Jesus recognized that what he was teaching was something different. It is at this point that the Sabbath meeting gets interesting. "Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and 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.'" This man who suddenly speaks out, whose voice we imagine is quite loud, is not a stranger, but one who is a member of their synagogue who is sitting there among them as usual until Jesus begins teaching. This man speaks out because the teachings of Jesus are threatening to him...That is clear by the question he asks..."Have you come to destroy us?" What it is exactly that is "unclean" that has come to reside in the man is not described, only that Jesus gives a command for it to leave the man. "But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him.'" The rebuke is a warning for the "spirit" to be silent, perhaps to keep it from infecting anyone else. The "unclean spirit" obeyed, after convulsing the man. The remaining members of the synagogue watching this exchange seem to be even more amazed as they ask themselves is what Jesus is bringing is a new teaching...one with authority. "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." The question which kept arising throughout Jesus' ministry was by whose authority did he say and do the things that he did. It seems ironic that when Jesus cast out the unclean spirits, they ALWAYS knew he was God's son, that he was the Holy One of God. In many of the accounts where Jesus encounters an unclean spirit, the encounter represents a healing, an instance where someone who has been separated from the community by the presence of the unclean spirit and a request has been made for Jesus to heal or restore. This is clearly not an example of that. This man was a neighbor, someone who was functioning as a part of the community until he encountered and was challenged by the teachings of Jesus. In today's context, what message does this passage have for us today? As disciples of Christ, we have already answered the question about Jesus' authority. We know by what authority he speaks; that it is his voice to which we should listen. However, this passage may be an illustration that there are some among us who are a part of the community as some level, not perhaps in the synagogue so to speak, but members of the wider community who have unclean spirits who become cry out and become enraged when challenged by the teachings of Jesus. Our passage from Deuteronomy came from the section of that book which contains what are known as the farewell addresses of Moses. Moses' speeches covered the Israelites history with

God through the wilderness and their petition to have an intermediary between themselves and God because of their fear. God agreed, but they were warned that although God would send them prophets; some would come who would not be bearing God's word. Throughout time, there have been two issues. People have gone their own way and not listened to God's prophets; they have followed false prophets. If we try to place this event in our own time and place, what are the teachings of our Lord that seem to be creating the loudest outcry against them? There have always been within humanity the ability to choose—there have always been ways to present these choices. I remember some illustrations from childhood where there were two figures...an angel and a devil that were perched on shoulders, each whispering in the ear of the child. In terms of modern day events, the unclean spirit of that person could easily represent hatred or prejudice held in the heart, it could represent fear of the stranger or their customs, it could represent anything which seemed to threaten the comfort or security of the individual who reacts when their way or perspective is challenged. What we are called to do is to be sure whose voice we hear amid all the shouting that is occurring around us. We have made a claim about whose voice we wish to follow, whose teaching have a claim upon our lives. What we need to find is a way to discern who is speaking with that voice, for as scripture warns us, not all that lay claim to be God's voice are truly speaking what God commands. My own personal litmus test: Does whatever is said fit with the major theme found in Micah 6:8—"He has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" or with the commandments that Jesus lifted up when asked: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." And, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." These actually are found in Deuteronomy as well as in each of the gospels. With that much clear indication of what theme scripture has for us, then when listening to the chaotic voices today, listen to see if are they carrying messages of love for others? Are they speaking of justice for all as we remember what Jesus declared as his mission which would bring God's reign among us? Or are they reacting angrily against those voices which are speaking in the language of Jesus' teachings? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.