

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

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."

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They 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."

At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

In this very brief text from Mark, it appears that Jesus has done it again. He has cleansed the spirit of some poor soul, and his fame grows within his community. I may have been in another frame of mind when I first read this in preparation for today, but it seemed to me that Jesus did more than send an "evil spirit" packing – he very admirably handled a heckler who interrupted his teaching in the synagogue – and this alone is worthy of exploration!

Heckling – yelling some comment out loud from the audience to the person up on stage who is speaking – is as old as time itself. We have proof here! It can happen any time, any place, any circumstance. I did a quick search online, and I was amazed at how often heckling occurs! There are articles galore, reporting instances of regular people gaining their few moments of fame because they spoke up in appropriately.

Of course, it happens at political rallies, and it happens at school board meetings or commencement ceremonies, and city council meetings. It happens at sporting events (and there are even rules about how to heckle properly for them!), and it happens most creatively at comedy shows when people are out for the night and probably have had a little too much to drink. It looks like heckling is an acceptable form of communicating in our society today, and *responding to it* can influence the reputation of the speaker.

For politicians and stand-up comedians, dealing with hecklers is part of the job. And how one handles them matters...from the Edmonton Comedy Festival web site which recently published quite a few stories about comics and hecklers...think about how this statement can be true for anyone who has to face a heckler head-on...

"Why dwell on the negative? Because the way comics deal with hecklers can reveal character, personality, strength, inner comic talent and in rare cases can even make – or break – a comedy career."

The same can be said for Jesus as he cultivated his ministry – in taking charge of the heckler in the synagogue, he demonstrated that he could handle just about anything tossed out from a crowd. Jesus was a master at intercepting comments from the field.

But it occurs to me that heckling doesn't seem to be limited to gatherings and groups of people. In another form, we could say that regular people get heckled – we just use other words like teased, nagged, coerced to describe it when it happens to us.

Some examples (and these could be experienced by anyone)...

You're giving your doctor a nice long list of what you do to take care of yourself, and he interrupts you to say, "That's just fine – but you need to lose 20 pounds to be truly healthy."

You're preparing dinner at home, whining about the crazy day you had, and your partner says, "Yeah, but it could be worse, you know. You could be unemployed."

You're at lunch with some friends, in the middle of sharing a tasty piece of gossip, and one of them says, "Who cares about this stuff? I like Susie and Dave and I hope things are OK with them."

Uh-oh. *This* isn't the way it goes at the comedy clubs!

Sometimes, being heckled means we're being forced to hear something we probably should pay attention to. The heckler (often someone we know and trust) is a messenger telling us a truth we need to hear, or reminding us how we should be as good people of God - and he or she is actually doing us a favor, if we listen and follow through.

So maybe some of the hecklers in our life-audiences aren't all bad – they're key players in our social conscience, and influence our behaviors in a positive way. We need the service they provide.

But, there are other hecklers in our lives that are much sneakier in how they operate and they don't come from *people* – they're constant, badgering *thoughts in our own heads*, sending messages through our brains.

These hecklers taunt us, and often fill us with doubt and insecurity, or they make us feel a little guilty or self-absorbed - and we get so overloaded when we hear them, we aren't strong enough to put them in their place or work to prove them wrong.

Do any of these resonate with you? Choose your descriptor...from the more destructive hecklers in our heads...

You aren't attractive, intelligent, classy, brave, thin, strong, worthy enough...or...

You aren't appreciated, respected, trusted, needed enough.

We know these messages are powerful and they can do damage, if we let them. How are we to respond?

And from the hecklers in our heads who want to guide us to doing right, (the ones we often ignore because the truth make us uncomfortable) we might hear...

You should watch what you eat, drink, and put in your body.

You should call your mother, father, sister, friend, home-bound person.

You should do something for someone else every day.

You should greet each day with hope, because life is still good.

With all these self-inflicted comments colliding in our heads, it's no wonder many people need to reach outside themselves for help in some form – from a friend or doctor who can listen, or from medication and life-practice that can bring us to a better place. Our internal heckling demands attention and some type of action, and it can feel like we spend too much of our lives trying to live with it.

So we now know that hecklers and heckling are in our reality. So what? Let's return to the text for today...

The man who heckled Jesus had as Mark described, an "unclean spirit" inside him that caused him to shout out, "Hey, Jesus. What are you doing to us? As the Holy One of God, have you come to destroy us?"

We don't really know what was wrong with the man, we just know that his behavior wasn't typical of what was expected in the Temple. This guy acted out...and it's very possible that he was so frustrated, so worried about his future, so frightened by all that had happened to him in his own life living under Roman rule, he was looking for some answers. He may even have been looking for help!

The man with the unclean spirit could be any one of us... And Jesus, in his wisdom, probably realized that his very presence in the Temple as a regular man filled with God's Spirit, as well as his teachings and ways of living and working, were a little unique and definitely not the usual stuff the people were used to seeing and hearing – and it would impact them in some fashion.

Jesus was aware he was bringing a new way of living a God-filled life that was radical and maybe even a little scary to regular folk. And I bet he also knew that this guy wasn't trying to insult him – this man just needed what Jesus could give him. In front of a crowd of worshipers, it was up to Jesus to face the heckler and make it right...the time had come for him to reveal his strength and authority from God.

And so, Jesus "healed."

Filled with relief, the man cried out – his body shook with release – and (as always) the people were amazed. Just think of the dinner conversations after this event!

We know our own bodies are riddled with the diseases of our internal hecklers, and our own lives provide all kinds of opportunities for external heckling as well. But if we are as wise as the man with the "unclean spirit," we know instinctively what to do.

We should stand among the crowd, and call out to Jesus – to God – to the Spirit – wherever we are – "What are you doing with me? Why are you here? I know you are the Holy One of God...heal me."

And Jesus will hear us and heal us, and we'll receive the intelligence and strength to put all those hecklers – inside and out - in their place.

All we have to do is ask.

Amen.

