

Words of Discouragement
Mark 1:21-28
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At wedding receptions you may have attended, the best man and the maid or matron of honor may have offered a toast, extolling the virtues of the couple or reminding the guests how they met, maybe sharing some borderline embarrassing memories of the bride or groom's earlier life. For some, standing up and speaking in public is a form of torture, and they barely make it through their stumbling speech. For others, however, give them a microphone and watch out. You may never get to the cake. In this latter category of speechmakers, the majority are those who either try, and succeed, or try, and miserably fail, to be funny. Either way, they all want to be comedians, whether they have the gift or not. And then you have Mary Dolan, the maid of honor at our wedding some nearly twenty years ago, who, perhaps encouraged by our own wedding guests, has decided to actually become a standup comedian. A mom with two young children, Mary has quit her job, and begun making the rounds of some of Washington D.C.'s comedy clubs where she is sharpening her act and gaining fans, at least on Facebook. Whether she makes it to the big time or not, at least her experiment gives Flora and I the opportunity to make the legitimate claim that we had a professional comedian perform at our wedding. Not that marriage is a laughing matter mind you. But did you hear the one about the husband who...?

As she gets her act together, Mary will need to learn the ins and outs of the trade: how to work with club managers, how to use the sound equipment, how to select material appropriate to her audience. All of that stuff is somewhat predictable, but there is one more, very unpredictable, thing she will also have to learn how to handle: the heckler, that annoying member of the audience who will try to disrupt her act, and make her flub a punch line, and get flustered, and want to give up. You've seen these people I'm sure. They yell out something rude from the back of the room in a vain attempt to draw attention to themselves. They try to draw the performer into a back and forth verbal tug of war, largely aimed at getting themselves some laughs at the expense of the performer who is getting paid to get the laughs. Hecklers are nothing new, and they are inevitable, and the accomplished performer, of any type, is the one who at once silences the heckler, and also absorbs the disruption into the act in such a way that it adds to, rather than detracts from, the success of the performance.

Maybe you recognized the heckler in tonight's story. Not that Jesus is your run of the mill comedian, although he is at times very funny, but here is Jesus teaching in the synagogue, performing, if you will, the crowd eating out of his hand, a buzz beginning to rumble through the pews about his teaching, maybe he's even coming up to the key point he is trying to make about the kingdom of God...and up pops a heckler who tries to do what hecklers through the centuries have always tried to do. "Hey, you! Yeah, wise guy, you, Jesus of Nazareth. What

have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” And of course, all eyes turn from Jesus to this new voice, to see who is doing this heckling, who is offering this challenge from the cheap seats. Now, of course we don’t have a transcript of the occasion, and maybe there was some back and forth for a bit, but it seems that Jesus doesn’t miss a beat, and does what accomplished performers are able to do: to at once silence the heckler, and also absorb the disruption into the act in such a way that it adds to, rather than detracts from, the success of the performance. “ ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. The crowd was amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the hecklers, I mean unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ ” Mission accomplished, Jesus. Excellent work. Would you like to come back for a return engagement at the Apollo? You see, “At once, his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.” And all he had to do was call out a heckler and put him in his place.

OK, so maybe it was a little more serious than that, but there are some interesting lessons to be learned from this story of how Jesus deals with the demon-possessed heckler, because this guy was neither the last heckler Jesus encountered, nor the last one to try to disrupt our lives, our performances, if you will. You see, that same voice of challenge, that same voice of doubt and discouragement, of attention-seeking, that voice is never fully and finally silenced,

no matter how adept we are. That voice that rings out shrilly in the world, or in our own heads, it won't go away until that day of the Lord we are all waiting for, when Christ returns and puts an end to heckling once and for all. And so, in the meantime, like our friend Mary Dolan, it is worth our time learning how to prepare for the hecklers we will encounter as we embark on new endeavors in ministry, as we take to heart these authoritative teachings of Jesus and try to live them out in our homes and workplaces, as we do our best to be faithful disciples, parents, grandparents, friends, spouses, because those hecklers will always be there, in every venue, taking every opportunity to get under our skin, to disrupt our act, and make us flub a punch line, and get flustered, and want to give up. Have you ever felt that way? Like just when you were about get that really big laugh, close that really important deal, teach that crucial lesson, share that Good News of the Gospel, someone stood up and stole your thunder? You see, that's exactly what the demons wanted to do that day to Jesus, to take his authority right out from under him, on the opening night of his act, in front of his most attentive audience, and to turn all eyes in the room on themselves. And they'll do it to you too, if you let them.

Maybe as I'm speaking, you are remembering when it's happened to you, or you are hearing those comments, those questions, start to roll around in your head. "You're not good enough, smart enough, fast enough, beautiful enough." "You don't have what it takes, you'll never succeed." "Who would want to hear what

you have to say?” “How can you betray your family like that?” “What kind of friend are you, anyway?” “Do you have enough money saved for your retirement?” “Is that the biggest diamond you can afford to give her, you loser?” Or the worst: “No one will ever love you.” It would be nice if the comments and criticisms that burrow deep within us, that undermine our ability to speak with authority, it would be nice if they came from as clearly visible a place as a guy acting crazy in church. But usually they come from our most trusted sources, and our innermost places. That is not to say that the people in our lives who may make these contributions are necessarily possessed with unclean spirits, although I have thought that at times about some members of my family. But it is to say that the heckling our family and friends and bosses and media outlets do takes its inspiration from the same demonic source as our story tonight. Jesus received his heckling from someone from his own religious community, or at least someone posing as someone who belonged there. At the very least, someone let him in the door. In other stories in the Gospels, Jesus gets it from the people of his hometown, his family who think he is the nutty one, that great collection of the Chief priests, Scribes and Pharisees, even his own disciples and followers, all of them people more or less close to him. Each of them take their turn offering up words of discouragement that he must turn back to remain faithful to the call God has given him. And so must we.

It is easier said than done, of course, especially when Jesus makes it look so easy, but it is not impossible. And I think we can collect some tips both from Jesus

himself, but also from the performers of our own time who are successful at deflecting what would bring them down and using it to lift themselves and their audiences up. First and foremost among these tips is to cling ever so tightly to the message Jesus was proclaiming in the synagogue in the first place: that God loves you, and that you have value in God's eyes that no demon can undermine; that God loves the world and wants it to be a habitable and humane place where hecklers have no place, and where words of discouragement fall on deaf ears. As we hear that those in the synagogue that day were astounded at his teaching, I think it was the authenticity of his words, his ability to distill into his own being the very grace of God which is at the center of the whole Biblical story, that people were responding to, and which that man with the unclean spirit wanted to deny. "What have you to do with *us*?" he asks. "Have you come to destroy *us*?" he asks, and the plural, the "us" *may* refer to multiple demons inside him, but maybe it is referring to the "us" of the people gathered for worship, and the unclean spirit is trying to call Jesus into question not only in his own mind, but also in the mind of the crowd that is beginning to warm to that message of divine love that is breaking into their world in a new way. Are you going to ruin it for the rest of us, Jesus? Are you going to bring the wrath of Rome down on our heads? Keeping that doubt at bay by holding on to God's grace is our best response to whatever form the hecklers in our lives may take. With the knowledge that God truly loves you, with those words

of grace as the soundtrack inside your head, the world's words of discouragement will find no place to hang their hat.

If you listen to the comedians and magicians and jugglers of the world talk about hecklers, you'll hear both some interesting insights about the hecklers themselves, and also some tips on how to deal with them. One of their most interesting observations is that generally, the reason they heckle is not because they don't like or don't admire the performer, but precisely the opposite, that in fact they are attracted to the performer, and are maybe even envious of their skill or ability to work the crowd. And so their heckling takes the form of a kind of verbal tugging of the performer's short sleeve, a "pay attention to me" kind of plea designed to draw them closer to the object of their affection. Of course, they are sometimes just nasty drunks, but often the heckler can be turned into an enthusiastic fan by making them a positive, if brief, part of the show rather than simply ignoring them or insulting them in an attempt to get them to shut up. In a sense, this is what Jesus did with the man with the unclean spirit. Instead of telling him to go away and leave him to teach in peace, or moving to another synagogue, or engaging in a destructive verbal battle, he took advantage of the opportunity to use the man to put an exclamation point on the teaching he was already doing. It is as if he invited the man up on stage, and won over the rest of the audience by doing so. Where the hecklers in our lives are concerned, what this may mean is to resist the urge to fight or run away, and instead find a new way, a good news way, of

interacting with the discouraging voices, which probably really only want to be closer to us in the first place. If you play the game the hecklers want you to play, you'll always lose. But if you invite the heckler to play the game on the Gospel's terms, an enemy becomes a friend, and the good news is shared more widely.

There is a sense in which the better we are at performing the roles God has given us, the more likely we are to attract hecklers. You see, people are attracted to holiness, whether their behavior suggests it or not. Some people come to the synagogue to listen and learn. Others come to heckle. But all come because there is something there that calls them, tugs them, amazes and astounds them. Not everyone will be able to negotiate that attraction in appropriate ways, but that should not, cannot, keep us from being the best performers we can be with the gifts God has given us. And part of that performance is taking the criticism and doubt that comes our way and transforming it into yet another experience of grace to share with the world. May God help each of us to learn the art of fending off the hecklers of the world that we may speak with the authority and authenticity Jesus showed in the synagogue that day. Amen.

Blessing in the Chaos

To all that is chaotic
in you,
let there come silence.

Let there be
a calming
of the clamoring,
a stilling
of the voices that
have laid their claim
on you,
that have made their
home in you,

that go with you
even to the
holy places
but will not
let you rest,
will not let you
hear your life
with wholeness
or feel the grace
that fashioned you.

Let what distracts you
cease.

Let what divides you
cease.

Let there come an end
to what diminishes
and demeans,
and let depart
all that keeps you
in its cage.

Let there be
an opening
into the quiet
that lies beneath
the chaos,
where you find
the peace
you did not think
possible
and see what shimmers
within the storm.