

A Divine Menace to Society
Mark 1:21-28
© Stacey Steck
Preached February 1, 2015 at San José, Costa Rica

So, whose's the biggest menace to society the world has ever known? 1920s Chicago gangster Al Capone? Ugandan dictator Idi Amin? Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik? Adolf Hitler, perhaps? Or maybe going back just a little further in history, how about good, old Jesus of Nazareth? On a list of threatening figures, you'd think the savior of the world would rank pretty low, but when it comes to evil spirits and empires, he's right up there with some of the greats.

I love these stories when Jesus is minding his own business, doing his saviorly thing and people get all wound up for no apparent reason. I mean, it's easy to make people mad at you. All you have to do is talk politics or religion at the dinner table, and there are plenty of stories in the Gospels when Jesus is picking a fight. But here is Jesus talking religion and politics where you are supposed to talk about them, at church, not saying anything provocative about throwing down the temple and rebuilding it in three days, or about who's blind or who's a hypocrite. In this story, he's just a regular guy teaching some regular folks about the Bible, and making some pretty good points, and up pops a party pooper trying to turn the rising tide of good news into a wave that will sink Jesus' ship. "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."

I don't know how you "hear" that statement, but I hear it dripping with sarcasm, and trying to poison the congregation against Jesus. The crowd has just heard words that were probably building them up, and yet this unclean spirit claims Jesus is there to tear them down, to bring ruin on their town, on their lives. I think that's what the plural "us" is about. "Have you come to destroy *us*?" the spirit provokes, trying to agitate as much the crowd as Jesus, to get them to suspect his motives. It's a question for which it already knows the answer, because it has recognized Jesus. But although the crowd has been impressed by Jesus' teaching, by the authority, the genuineness, the authenticity, the truth behind it, no one but the unclean spirit has really yet made the connection, that this is a force to be reckoned with, and truly a menace to society.

Yes, that unclean spirit is unusually perceptive, and a truth-teller on top of that. This episode tells us that that at its core, the Gospel message is good news to some, but it is bad news to others. And if you preach it right, if you live it right, the good news will be a threat in and of itself. You won't have to go looking for a fight. It will come to you. You see, for as much as the Gospel is about making order out of chaos, and shining light in the darkness, and making something out of slime, and calling us to seize God, all things that sound really great on the face of things, the Gospel is also naturally disruptive, because chaos likes chaos and darkness likes darkness and slime likes slime, and the principle of *carpe diem* rules the day and the economy. And those things, like their friend the unclean spirit, will recognize

the truth as bad news faster than those for whom the truth is good news, and they will fight back. They will fight back with everything at their disposal. Maybe it begins with a question in the synagogue, and if that doesn't work, a smear campaign to ruin a reputation, or a brick through a window in the middle of the night, or threats to family and friends, or, finally, murder itself, anything to maintain the status quo of a society that looks too often like the evil twin of the Kingdom of God Jesus came a'preachin. And so Jesus not only looks like, but fundamentally is, a menace to society, just by opening his mouth.

Now, that might sound like Jesus is a threat only to the powers that be, the ones that keep people poor, and sentence to prison unequally for the same crime, and bribe their way to positions of power, but that is only the easiest part of the story to tell, the one that lets most of us off the hook. No, the very wise author, Jean Kerr, was onto something when she once said, "The real menace in dealing with a five-year-old is that in no time at all you begin to sound like a five-year-old." The evil twin of the Kingdom of God, the one we live in, makes us over in its image, and we become the wrong kind of menace to society.

The English word menace comes from the Latin meaning "threatening," but that is only the figurative meaning. The more literal use has to do with sharp points, pinnacles, battlements, parapets, things that will hurt you, or at least make you think twice about going where you shouldn't go or doing what you shouldn't do. The razor wire around our houses is menacing. The teeth of our guard dogs are

menacing. The machetes we keep by the front door, or the pistols we hide under our pillows, just in case, are menacing. We want to keep people from entering where they should not enter. Whether we like it or not, we have become menaces to the society around us, and not in a Kingdom of God kind of way. And those threatening measures we call security are only the physical manifestations of our menace. The sharp word, the cold shoulder, even the polite but untrue response, “I’m fine” to a question about our well-being, are a means to menace, to keep people out of our lives and out of our business. And when we’re in that defensive, threatening posture, Jesus seems like a menace to even we who aren’t “the powers that be”, when he asks us to come and follow, to preach the good news, to share ourselves and our possessions, to be the servants of others, to leave ourselves exposed and vulnerable, open to attack. Behind our barbed wire and fences, we feel Jesus as a menace, and we are filled with unclean spirits, asking, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”

Yes, those suspicion-raising questions that unclean spirit asked out loud in the synagogue so many years are still working silently on our hearts today. We find it hard to trust that we can really live the provocative Gospel Jesus preached that day, and survive until the next. We just can’t quite sell all our possessions, give the money to the poor, and live on the treasure we have in heaven. Our way of life is a threat to no one, our words about the Kingdom of God dismissed as easily as the next empty promise of the government. And why shouldn’t we fear? Jesus didn’t

survive. Stephen didn't survive, nor Peter, nor Paul, nor the martyrs of the early church, all of them silenced by evil spirits and empires. It's as if we've forgotten the last half of tonight's story, the part in which Jesus says, " 'Be silent and come out of him!' and the unclean spirit, convulsing him, and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him." It's as if we've forgotten that God raised Jesus from the dead, or that the church survived, or that the Al Capones and the Idi Amins and the Anders Breiviks and the Adolf Hitlers of the world don't live forever, but that Jesus Christ does, and is still the Holy One of God, and still calls us to follow no matter the cost, and still wants us to be the right kind of menace to society. Yes, the Gospel he preached that day in Capernaum is still bad news for our sinful selves and for our sinful society, and we still resist and fight back against his holiness. But the good news of today is that he still commands the unclean spirits out of us, and frees us to leave our fear behind, come out in the open, and live in the same amazement they experienced that day. Friends, let us come to Christ's table with our guards down and our hands outstretched to receive the gift of grace, and let us go forth with a righteousness that makes us a divine menace to society. Amen.