



TOUCH POINT

Devils and French Fries – Touchpoint for January 24, 2024

Mark 1:21-28 (NRSVUE) The Man with an Unclean Spirit

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

One thing that makes family close is the traditions we create, those that bring us together for fun and laughter. Some have Sunday family dinner, game nights, etc. In my extended family we had Sunday bowling night. It was typically my Uncle Arthur, my mom, siblings, and the older grandkids. Occasionally the young ones came, and we welcomed them with semi-open arms. My 5-year-old niece Ami came one night, and my generous Aunt Teddy bought everyone a large order of fries to share. Well, little Ami found her spot. Hovering over those delicious bowling alley French fries. Our mom, her Oma, came to her and whispered, “Mija, be sure you let others have French fries, they are for everyone.” Ami leaned into Oma and whispered back, “You’re not the mother of the French fries.”

In our western culture, given authority is highly regarded. Credentials at the Phoenix Open, degrees, licenses, ordination, VIP everything from parking to pickle ball. It’s never ending. You even need a code to go to bathroom now. Who actually has authority to do what they do and say what they say? We all want to know.

But then there are those who speak with great authority. They are motivational, inspiring, and charismatic. They write books, start podcasts and boom people refer to them as an authority. We want an authority to tell us what to do, how to feel and who to trust. Often, we have settled for a populist or outright cult figure. Every church thinks they have their person, often a guy. Every political campaign thinks they have their guy. Every denomination believes they must have their guy and it trickles down to the guy’s guys. The guys on the lowest of the totem pole flaunt that they are the guy who works for the guy’s guy.

The Old Testament gives us a story, I might even say a prophesy, of what can happen when we demand an authority, a king to fight our battles militarily or individually, and dictate the doings of others. The Israelites demanded a king to protect them against the Philistines. The Israelites wanted Saul to be king. They never had a king before this. Samuel knew the Israelites should not appoint Saul, but in their fear they demanded Saul be king.

Samuel, the prophet and wise leader was God’s guy. He was the Israelites’ last judge before the succession of kings. Until then the tribe’s leaders gathered and always saw God as a sufficient judge. It was the kingdom of God. But Saul’s popularity grew after he and his troops defeated the Philistines, demonstrating great strength. The Israelites demanded a King.

Samuel was always devoted to Yahweh first. He reluctantly gave in to the growing populism and appointed Saul. Samuel and the tribes had always relied on God, but now they rejected God in favor of a person who had the might and the lip service for God. God gave them what they wanted. These are Samuel's words to the people: "You said to me, we want a king to rule over us, even though the Lord your God was your king. Now here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the Lord has set a king over you." I don't have to tell you it doesn't go well.

In his book *The Spirit of Life*, Jürgen Moltmann states that the development of extremist conservative theology is based on an authoritarian God. The extremist liberal rejects the idea of an authoritarian God and therefore, tends to reject the existence of God in response.

This story in Mark shows Jesus' compassion toward a possessed man who was in the synagogue. He went to the synagogue! Why?! Why did this man go to the synagogue? Was he possessed by anti-God devils? Devils, meaning slanderers and liars. If the devils had so much power, why didn't they forbid the man from going to the synagogue? The house of God. Could the man have gone there for help, hope or healing? Maybe the man didn't feel safe anywhere else. Whatever possessed him, harassed him, spoke for him evidently did not control him enough to keep him away from his decision to go to the synagogue. He came for something.

The temple was a place for teaching and instruction, not like today's church where music and worship are the center. If someone had a new message to bring this is where they brought it. Maybe the possessed man came with hope of a new message for his beaten and wearied soul. Most likely, all could see the demonized man's distress. Jesus, in his compassion, couldn't ignore the man's torment, as he sat huddled, like a bullied child. It appears no one noticed the man. No one takes a step to care for him. Jesus needed angels to care for him in his weakened state after conflict with his devils. In the synagogue, I want to know where the man's angels were after the exorcism. Where was his angel guard? It was Jesus this day, and only Jesus.

For children, the term Guardian Angel came from this period when any disorder, mental illness or outlandish behavior was potentially a devil taking residence in the victim's head. There were demons everywhere that hated everything human, lurking between people and God. It was thought that children were especially vulnerable.

The people believed in everything demonic, creating images like Pokémon collectibles. There was a demon for everything: heart disease, colitis, and adult ADHD. I'm not making light of this, it was a big deal then, and still is a big deal. I would not minimize the evil in the world. We've seen it, but perhaps it's not something that originates outside the hearts of people. It seems we see evil in the world easily, but we are deaf to Jesus' words. Jesus said that evil originates in the hearts of people.

*"For out of **the heart** come **evil intentions**, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, **theft**, false witness, slander.*

– Matthew 15:9

Like Saul, all the outward appearances can appear correct, but it's the heart that becomes corrupt.

It's like the phone call in a teen thriller in which the phone rings over and over. The pretty girl locks the doors and hides. The phone rings again and she cries, "It's in the house!" Maybe the evil in the world originates from within the hearts of people. The illusion is that evil can happen to me, possess me, with mere threats and emotional bullying. I still contend that nothing that God is in, can be possessed by evil. Harassed, yes!

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

The scribes had the duty of extracting rules and regulations from the *Torah*, and passing judgment on cases. Jesus shot from the divine hip; in sports, they call it 'head on a swivel,' aware of the surroundings. Jesus showed an authority that emerged from his spirit-led awareness, but not through the blinding filter of governing law... a combination of knowledge and power.

A judge has the power of authority given him and he's not afraid to use it. Am I right?! The judge has been given authority for specific tasks. I don't believe a pastor has been given power, other than to be a child of God, the 'least of these'... an example for being selected as God's knucklehead, carrying with them an invitation to walk together in the love of God. They are stewards and decision makers guiding others to where power can be accessed. Yet how often do we see religious leaders act as one with authority? The people in the religious and political world were used to recognizing one who speaks with given authority, but Jesus was not one of them. He was not given authority by man. They saw him "as one who speaks as though he has authority."

It's scary when I wield my worldly authority using smart-sounding words and spewing expectations, and another displays the authority that love gives.

The scribes and the demons were unified in saying to Jesus, "you speak as one with authority." It was baffling to them. Since everyone feared demons, the demons figured they could get away with stuff. Little did anyone know victims needed to speak directly to the illusion of power. In a world that practiced trepanation (the drilling of a hole in the skull of a person to release the evil spirits), Jesus simply spoke.

I remember being taught about spiritual warfare. I've yet to meet someone with the right weapons to swipe at the accuser in the air and do harm. Rejecting the lies and the slander of emotional harassment is what Jesus did by rebuking the words of the devils. The devils said to Jesus, "Are you going to destroy us?" US? Is the demon referring to him and his posse? Or is he trying to say, "The man you're talking to Jesus, is with me!"

Jesus ignores the man asking, 'Are you going to destroy us?' and instead speaks to these voices of oppression sort of like this: "No, WE are going to destroy you!" How cool is that. God invites us to participate in God's warfare by awakening us to the problem. Here's the way Paul Tournier puts it, "Jesus knew perfectly well that he could never cure the man in trouble unless he assumed the reality of the disease. It was real to the man and had to be treated as such or it could never be cured. In the end, we conclude, that there are some answers we do not know."

The evil is real, but I do not understand it. However, since I shook off the idea that I must wage a war against it, I have not encountered it. It has no life-giving breath, but only a stink in the air. Maybe a good candle and a centering prayer will help create an emotional receptivity to God as king rather than a panic-driven election of a false god.

Jesus was given authority by God, the mind of God in discernment. He knew what he was dealing with. There are gifted people today who can see what they're dealing with when they meet a person in distress. I see one on a regular basis. I've never been asked, "Does this person speak as with authority?" Do they have authority to be doing what they're doing, and tell you that? My loved ones are simply happy that I got my crap together. It means now I have the emotional sobriety to discern ego fearfully trying to protect me from suffering or failure. I see the *shoulds* for what they are. Then I can say, "Back!," like Jesus to the devilish liars, "You're not the mother of the French fries!"

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir, Remember Me)

Be still, know that I am God

Calm Me, Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Dwell Among Us

(Salt of the Sound)

- 1) Keep moving and living and breathing in us
- 2) Keeping working and singing and speaking through us
- 3) You dwell among us...
- 4) With all this life I long to see, more of You and less of me
- 5) Lord send Your Spirit here to work in us.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(The Scottish Festival Singers)

Benediction

Sevenfold Amen

(The Emmanuel Quartet)

Amen.