

Astounded, Healed, Amazed
Rachel Watson
Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA
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Text: Mark 1:21-28

Noelia came to our school about a month into the school year and about a month later was transferred into my classroom. She wasn't having an easy time transitioning to school. We had tried all kinds of things to help her, pictures of her mom to carry around, goodbye rituals, comfort objects, and a whole lot of social-emotional coaching. But nothing was really working. So on this particular day, I heard her start crying as the kids bustled around during math centers. As the rest of her classmates buzzed around her, she just stood there in despair. I prepared to go comfort her yet again, but when I got up I saw that another child had already approached her. Four-year-old Jasmine had her hand around Noelia's shoulder and was whispering quietly to her. Noelia was still crying, but it was obvious she was listening. I didn't move, partly because I didn't want to startle them and partly because I was entranced by what I was seeing. Jasmine patted her back, looked her in the eyes, and continued to whisper. Never breaking eye contact, Jasmine took a deep breath and Noelia did too. I could hear Jasmine saying, "You're safe. You can handle this. Breathe with me. We love you here." And I could see Noelia's shoulders melt as she began to relax, inexplicably peaceful and seemingly unaware of the chaos that was swirling around them. Jasmine was repeating a script I'd modeled so many times, to Noelia and to the others when big feelings erupted as they often do in a preschool classroom. But something bigger than those words had happened there between them. Something amazing that created a sacred space between them and gave that little girl peace.

That's the thing about sacred moments. They are often unexplainable. There's a piece that transcends our human understanding. It's a thin space where we are acutely aware of the divine and we can't explain it, so we are just captivated by its power. A moment where you suddenly feel completely in sync with the world around you. A conversation with a friend where you feel something fundamentally shift because of their words, even though you'd be hard-pressed to explain exactly what or why. These are sacred moments.

To be sacred is to be connected with the divine. To be in a sacred space is to be connected in such a pure and clear way that you are transformed by the experience. The opposite of sacred is profane. Something profane is something that disrupts our connection with the divine. Something that muddies the connection between us and God.

In the scriptures, this disconnection with the divine is portrayed as uncleanness. The disconnected spirit is unclean. This is the state of the man in the story. His spirit is muddled...troubled. As much as we don't want to place ourselves among those called unclean, you've probably felt this unease in yourself from time to time. The demons of doubt, fear,

overwhelm, and unworthiness plague you and God seems farther away. Just as we can feel the peace settle into our bodies when we know we are in the midst of the sacred ... we can feel when the profane tightens its grip, takes our breath away, and steals our peace.

But, and let's get this out of the way early, the most grace in this story is extended to this person. This person is the only one who fully understands who Jesus is. Sure, we wish we could live among the sacred all the time, but this story gives us hope when we fall short. Because when it is the hardest to see how we are to live faithfully, when we feel like obeying God would threaten to undo us, when everything seems like too much and almost hopeless, that's when Jesus comes to stand with us right where we are and command the things that disconnect us to be silent so we can be healed.

I was asked recently to think about a time when I came up short, was stuck or troubled, and God's grace and provision showed up for me. I recounted a time in seminary when things were really hard. I was trying how to figure out to juggle it all, parent, child, worker, student, friend, human, and I felt like I was failing everyone, meeting no one's expectations. See, my demon, the thing that separates me from holy community, is thinking I'll be a burden if I ask for help. And I needed help. My spirit was troubled. As I sat in chapel that week near tears, although I was careful that no one would know I was failing here too, my prayer was raw. What do you want from me? Why is this so hard?

And for some reason, my neighbor put her hand on mine and I involuntarily took a deep breath. In the midst of chapel full of people unaware of what was happening, she created sacred space and silenced the messages of unworthiness on replay in my brain. These exorcism stories give hope that Jesus approaches when it's the hardest to see how we could ever do the hard things he asks or when we don't know what else to do but rail against him for putting us there.

As humans, we often live in ways that trouble us. We want to live and behave in a certain way, to do kind and compassionate things, but we feel trapped by a world that plays by cutthroat rules. We get ourselves into situations that seem outside our control to change and they weigh on our spirits. Hard things happen - we become overwhelmed with the enormity of life and it seems like it's going to undo us.

When he hears what Jesus says, the man with the unclean spirit responds in fear. "What do you want with us, Jesus? Did you come to make us perish? I know who you are. You are the Holy One, God." I know this prayer.

When my daughter was in third grade, she came to meet me after school because something happened that had her heart hurting and she couldn't wait until I got out of my faculty meeting. See, there was a kid in her class named Ray. Ray was rough and likely to say hurtful things. He

would just as soon mess up your project than help you if he was in your group. On this day, the teacher had told the whole class not to talk to him anymore because he was bad. They should just ignore him. Karen said Ray had looked so sad as she said this. Her heart was breaking for him because she knew this wasn't the way to treat a person. But her teacher had told her to. I suggested to Karen that maybe she could show him a little kindness, even if he didn't repay it. But her teacher, walking into the room overheard and reiterated her warning. I said something about how if you'd never had a friend, how would you know how to be one?

Karen was troubled. I could see her processing her dilemma. Something was telling her that she should reach out, but if she did, she stood to lose a lot. She might be ostracized by the other kids. The teacher might think she was a bad kid too. And Ray was hard to be nice to. She agonized over it. She knew in her heart what she needed to do, but it was hard. Karen did reach out. She worked with him when no one else would. Months later, I had car duty and Ray happened to be at my station. He looked at me and said, "I know who you are. You're Karen's mom." I nodded. He continued, "She's the only person who's nice to me here. She's my friend. And I feel bad because sometimes the other kids tease her for it. But she's the only one who likes me here and I'm glad she's my friend." Wouldn't it have been easier to make her teacher happy? To live according to the rules of the playground that offers so few second chances? But deep down she knew who it was that she heard whispering to her heart and she took the chance to build a sacred space for her and for him.

The thing is whenever we heed the radical teachings of Jesus and choose to work in the world in Jesus's way, it can be really hard. Whether that's loving the one the world deems unworthy or giving up our security to offer compassion or simply living another day when our brains make it hard to love ourselves or when our emotions overwhelm us and leave us exhausted...these are days when you just want to shout at God and say, "What do you want from us? Have you come to destroy us?"

The good news is that the answer is a resounding no. Jesus didn't come so we would perish, but so that we could be brought into new life and new order. And Jesus offers grace in his presence. Jesus brings the divine so incredibly close to us. That's the grace I see in this passage. Let me tell you the story again. Jesus came into the synagogue on the sabbath day to do what people do in the synagogue on a sabbath day. Likely, the place was busy, people bustling around, people talking about the Torah, people completing the traditional rituals. And Jesus is so confident, so comfortable with this message that people are spellbound. In the midst of all this, a man appears, troubled of spirit. He yearns for the sacred...that's why he's there...but the world has its grip on him and he can't see how this kingdom living could ever work. Jesus stops and goes to him. Jesus rebukes the spirits that trouble him to be silent. Then Jesus stays while the man wrestles with his spirit, tossing and turning, shouting and screaming. Jesus creates a space for the sacred for them in midst of busy-ness that swirls around them with his words and with his presence. Jesus heals

him, renewing his spirit, and transforming him with the hope of new possibilities. And those who watched in wonder hardly dared to move as they saw this miracle.

So, friends, that when your spirit is troubled and the demons of doubt and greed and fear are circling you and you just want to shout, “What do you want with us, Jesus?” know that the answer is, “To make you whole. To grant you peace. To exercise love and exorcise all that would separate you from me.” Breathe in the healing breath of the Spirit and believe the good news. Amen.