

Things They Don't Teach in Seminary

Mark 1:21-28

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For several years now, First Baptist Church has adopted the posture of being a “teaching” congregation, in that we have chosen to seek out new seminary graduates for intentional apprenticeships.

We have called them Pastoral Residencies – and the concept isn't all that different than the medical field. With medicine, you go to medical school for all of the book learning, but you have to participate in a residency, usually at a hospital, in order to become proficient in practicing medicine. Nobody wants the heart surgeon whose only passed the written exam on heart surgery, right? We want the surgeon who is practiced, seasoned, proven.

So Pastoral Residency works the same way. We invite a brand new seminary graduate who has earned an advanced degree in theology or ministry, and we invite them to come practice on us.

I like to compare the whole process to a tool box full of tools. Seminary fills a student's toolbox up with the tools needed for ministry, but residency teaches him or her how to use the tools... so that they don't use a hammer to drive a screw or a screwdriver to chisel rock, metaphorically speaking.

But sometimes – and maybe more often than we'd like to admit – seminary doesn't give us *all* the tools we need for ministry. In fact, my favorite game to play with our Pastoral Residents is “They don't teach that in seminary...”

Have you ever climbed into the attic of a church and tried to hang Moravian stars from the ceiling? They don't teach that in seminary.

Have you ever had to lead a staff meeting? They don't teach that in seminary.

Have you ever had to memorize the sanctuary light switches with their four dials and dozens of on/off options so that in the dark you can turn a light on at just the right moment in the Christmas Eve service? They don't teach that in seminary.

Have you ever pulled the tooth of a Martinez girl? They don't teach that in seminary.

Have you ever made Ash for the Ash Wednesday service? They don't teach that in seminary... at least not at Baptist seminary!

Have you ever had to perform an exorcism? Guess what. They don't teach that in seminary.

Exorcism is not exactly a topic we mainline protestant Christians are comfortable talking about. Or maybe it's just me... but I kind of doubt it.

I can't help but wonder what Simon and Andrew and James and John must have thought that first day on the job. Here, just one verse earlier, Jesus was plucking them off the shore of the Sea of Galilee, but now they are in the synagogue on the sabbath in Capernaum when Jesus starts *teaching*.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus, above all else, is a *teacher*. Mark mentions Jesus' teaching, or records him being referred to as teacher, more than *thirty times* in this short Gospel. And that holds true in our passage this morning: "...he entered the synagogue and *taught*. They were astounded at his *teaching*, for he *taught* them as one have authority, and not as the scribes" (Mk. 1:21-22).

Three times in two verses – and the poor scribes are thrown under the bus to boot. Jesus, the untrained itinerant teacher is teaching in such a way that those listening were *astounded* – which was apparently very different than when the professionally-trained experts in scripture taught. As the professionally-trained expert on scripture trying to teach right now, this story is already starting to hit a little too close to home!

But my feelings aside, Jesus' teaching was different. It was anything but average. He made the scriptures speak in a way that they had not experienced before. It was as if he... *brought them to life*.

Have you ever had a teacher who did that for you? Who brought the story up off of the page and made it seem as if it was speaking directly to you?

A couple of weeks ago, I was getting my oil changed. I tend to use that thirty or forty minutes to call my mom or to call folks I haven't had a chance to catch up with in awhile. I decided to call one of my mentors from my college days.

He began the conversation by telling me how he'd recently decided to come out of retirement and serve as a part-time minister of pastoral care for a Disciples of Christ church in his town – First Christian Church. He said, "Dan, I've been baptist my entire life – since the moment I was born. But now I tell people that when I decided to stop being baptist it was so I could become a Christian!"

As the conversation carried on, we talked about the struggles of pastoring while in the midst of a pandemic – not being able to see our people face-to-face; not being able to visit them in the hospital; struggling to keep up with everyone by phone, email, or otherwise; knowing our people were struggling with isolation, loneliness, depression.

He said, "Dan, I've been thinking a lot lately about how God saves us, especially as we are all stuck in this situation that we didn't ask for and that we can't change no matter how much we might want to. I don't think God saves us *from* our circumstances. I think God saves us *in* them."

And then he said, “Do you remember the story of Daniel and the lions’ den?”

“Or course,” I said. I mean, I’m only named after the guy.

He said, “Read it again. God did not save Daniel *from* the lions’ den. God saved him *in* it.” It was like the story had suddenly been brought to life in a whole new way.

He went on. “It was the same with Paul, wasn’t it? Three times Paul asked to have that infirmity removed from him, but God didn’t remove it. Instead God said, ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’ Paul wasn’t saved *from* it. Paul was saved *in* the midst of it.”

It’s an incredible thing when a teacher can bring scripture off the page and into our lives, isn’t it?

What must it have been like to watch Jesus teach with such power and authority that the people were astounded by it – and the unclean spirits were threatened by it.

Suddenly, there was a man with an unclean spirit in their synagogue, 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.”

What had been the best Sunday school lesson these people had ever attended suddenly turned into something much more... confrontational?

It’s interesting that throughout Mark’s gospel, Jesus works to keep his identity a secret. Just a few verses after this story, Jesus cleanses a leper, but immediately after healing the man, warns him sternly, saying, “See that you say nothing to anyone” (Mk 1:40ff). And immediately after Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah, scripture says that Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone about him (Mk 8:29-30). Scholars call it “the Messianic Secret.”

But this unclean spirit seems to know who he is: the Holy One of God.

In that day knowledge of someone’s identity was thought to give power over them, so this could have been the unclean spirit’s attempt at gaining power over Jesus. But Jesus will have none of it: “Be silent, and come out of him!”

That’s it. No candles, no seances, no magic crystals, no medallions, no crosses, no holy water, no “the power of Christ compels me!” – no rituals or artifacts of any kind; just the powerful words of the Teacher, and the unclean spirit convulsed the body of the man and came out, liberating him from what had bound him.

Day one as a disciple and Jesus is performing exorcisms. Can you imagine standing in Simon or Andrew or James or John’s shoes? If this were my seminary, I’d be thinking about withdrawing and going to a... less charismatic one.

We are blessed, aren't we, to have other means of treating the physical and mental ailments that our ancestors termed "possession?" The fields of medicine and psychology have made it possible for us to stop blaming everything we can't explain on demons and unclean spirits.

But I hope we won't let go of Jesus exorcism stories too quickly because of the way Hollywood or Ouija Boards have made us think about the concept of demons and unclean spirits.

We need exorcism stories because they remind us that evil is real, and not theoretical.

Kathleen Norris says, "Scratch the surface of any ordinary church congregation and you will not find hypocrites but people struggling with demons" (*Amazing Grace*, 46). She doesn't mean little red devils carrying pitchforks. She means the way in which our brokenness can haunt us, infecting aspects of our lives that we never meant for our brokenness to infect.

She tells the story of a pastor friend in a small, rural congregation who has several men who turn over their paychecks to him to deliver to their wives; otherwise, they know they would gamble them away.

I will never forget when Christen and I served as summer missionaries on a small island in the Potomac River back in college. Our pastor there was a wonderful older man who had been brought up on the rough-and-tumble streets of inner-city Baltimore. His name was Larry and his wife was Janet.

Half way through the summer, his grandkids came to stay with them. Their mom wanted a break, and their dad – Larry and Janet's son – was too drunk too much of the time to take them. So she dropped the kids on Larry and Janet's doorstep.

Later that week, as Larry confessed the situation to me, he said, "We think demons are like in the cartoons – sitting on our shoulder, whispering temptations in our ears. Demons aren't ghosts or goblins. They're more dangerous to our lives than that. They're things we do to ourselves, like my son and his drinking. Sometimes we grab hold of something, and we have no idea that it might actually be grabbing hold of us..."

Some demons are more obvious than others. But some are borne in private.

When I was at school at Princeton, I became friends with another student who had been special forces in the Army before his seminary days. He'd served multiple tours in Afghanistan, but now suffered near debilitating PTSD. As you might imagine, as special forces he'd witnessed some of the heaviest fighting of the conflict. He would never share the details, but he did share that he'd witnessed the traumatic death of a close friend – watched the whole thing happen, unable to do anything to save him. "It was a

single second of my life,” he said, “but now I feel like I’m reliving that moment *every* second.”

For some it is being on the receiving end of painful words as a child — about their weight, about how they dressed, about their intelligence, about the color of their skin, about how poor their family might have been. Others wrestle with the demons left over from physical abuse, mental abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse. For many, betrayal is the demon has taken hold of them. Others have little control over the mental illnesses that plague them and make them feel less than worthy of a full life. And for others it’s the simple fear of not being good enough — of never measuring up.

I think I you get the point. Scratch anyone deep enough and you’ll find a demon they’d like to exorcise from their lives.

That’s why we need to keep these stories — because they remind us that evil is real, even if it isn’t a little red devil carrying a pitchfork.

And more importantly, they remind us that Jesus stands against the powers of evil in this world — even when they are found in a place of worship on the sabbath, even when they are found in us.

Ashley Jane Boots tells this story:

“As a toddler, my niece named her baby blanket, ‘Sniff.’ Sniff was made out of a fleecelike material with a satin border. He was originally white but over time became the shade of grey my mom refers to as ‘well-loved.’

Faye brought Sniff with her everywhere and talked about him a lot. Sometimes she’d spread Sniff out carefully on the floor, then pinch his center with her fingers and lift him up. She’d wrap her little hand around the pinched middle, about five inches down. ‘That’s his head,’ she’d say, pointing to the gathered fabric above her hand.

One day we were sitting around the kitchen table when Faye slid Sniff across the table to me. ‘Here, Tanta,’ she said. ‘I’ve been waiting to come to your house because Sniff has a rip, and I thought since you know how to sew you could fix him.’

I have remedial mending skills at best and worried that my work would disappoint Faye. I wanted to make sure she knew that because of the type of fabric and where the tear was located, Sniff wouldn’t just go back to the way he used to look. Sniff was always going to have a little scar. She listened seriously and said that was okay. So I stitched up Sniff. The tear was gone, but a few stitches were visible and the material was slightly puckered in one corner. Faye was delighted.

People like me, who don’t have children of our own, sometimes have an underlying suspicion that maybe God didn’t think we were up to the task. When that thought gets loud in my mind, I remember that Faye asked *me* to mend Sniff. I could someday write

a best-seller, preach a sermon that brought a hundred people to Jesus, or finally manage to give up cursing, but the thing I would be most proud of in this life is that Faye trusted me to mend Sniff, despite knowing that I would scar him" (*The Christian Century*, December 30, 2020, p. 29).

The truth is we all have wounds that need to be gently named, pushed across the table, and lovingly mended.

What name would you give yours?

What is the name of your wound?

Maybe the Teacher is waiting on you to call out its name, so that he can save you — not *from* your wound, but right *in the midst* of it.

Amen.