

“A Familiar Face” / Mark 1:21-28 / 29 January 2012

The unclean spirit shrieks at Jesus, “What are you doing here? Oh, I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” Has it ever happened, when you were in a strange place, faraway from home, that you chanced across someone you knew? This happened to a friend of mine from Exeter, California. He had just graduated from high school and took a trip to Great Britain. He was changing subway trains in London when he happened to see one of his high school classmates in the crowd. And they had a joyful reunion. They’d been “acquaintances” back in the States. They weren’t really even friends. If they had stood in line together at a convenience store back home, they’d have nodded politely. But there in the strangeness of Marylebone Station, where English people rushed by with their umbrellas, and muffled BBC accents announced the “underground shed-yules” in military time—well—under those conditions, they were long-lost brothers. Oh, the power of a familiar face! In the right context, even a relatively distant degree of familiarity becomes precious. “What are you doing here, Holy One? I know you!”

In a crowded airport in Louisville, Kentucky, I saw Russ in line at a fast-food counter. I had very little in common with Russ. We had just met at a conference for Presbyterian missionaries, and now we happened to be at the airport, waiting for our flights. We had both just undergone the “sharing times.” We had sat in the same small groups, a little harried and embarrassed, as some small-group-facilitator urged us to talk openly about our feelings. Aside from the fact that both Russ and I had been a little slow to open up under those circumstances, we had very little in common. Maybe we had sat at the same table in the cafeteria once or twice. We’d shared brief exchanges about our work and the countries where we served. But Russ was a very different person from me; that was clear. Russ was married, in his seventies, and just coming back to the US after nearly half a century as a missionary in Pakistan. He often excused himself from our small groups for about three minutes at a time, and whenever he returned to the circle of chairs, he smelled cigarette smoke. Russ was grizzled, and experienced, a man of few words. I thought he carried a deep sadness around with him, as of a man who had been forced out of Pakistan and made to come “home” to a place he no longer knew. His watery old eyes looked like they’d seen more than a lifetime of grief and loss. He seemed tired, cheerless, worn.

I, on the other hand, was twenty-five years old, single, and bound for West Africa. I was enthusiastic, spellbound by the prospect of a new life in an exotic land. The last thing I wanted was some burned-out retiree telling me that there’s more to missionary work than just palm trees and sun. Russ and I had very little in common, and we weren’t really friends. But when Russ glanced up and noticed me from across the busy terminal, his sad old face broke out in a warm smile of recognition. When he noticed me in a big room full of strangers, then suddenly Russ looked cheerful and alive. Russ and I were just acquaintances who’d met at a somewhat tedious conference. But when we saw each other in an airport full of strangers, suddenly we were just like old friends. All it took was a familiar face to make both of us feel less alone. So Russ and I had lunch together. He offered me a cigarette, which I declined. We talked for about two hours until his flight left for Pittsburgh and my flight left for Cleveland. ~The power of recognition! Even a mere acquaintance is a friend when you’re surrounded by strangers. When Jesus stood up to speak in the synagogue, it was only the so-called “unclean spirit” who recognized him for who he really was. “I know you, Holy One. I know you.”

Of course, it's beyond the scope of this sermon to ponder such questions as, "How do they happen to know each other—Jesus and this disreputable fellow, this shrieking, anxiety-laden, angry, troubled spirit?" We might ask ourselves in passing, had they been friends, long ago, or mere acquaintances, back in the mists of a happier time? Perhaps in the far-off realms of light, before the world ever got broken? Ancient legend has it that evil spirits were once angels who fell into disgrace. We might also ask if we really have to believe in devils to find something of meaning in this story. We'll get to that question a little bit later. There are many questions swirling around this text. But for the gospel writer Mark, the driving question is "Who?" Who is Jesus that he teaches with such authority, and why is it that the good religious folks don't know him? Who is Jesus, and how can it be that nobody knows who Jesus is—aside from those tormented spirits, who come reluctantly into his presence, recognizing him, crying out to be made free?

Many people outside the church believe that people who come to church are hypocrites who think they're better than everyone else. In my experience, that isn't usually the case. No, I don't believe most people come here because they think they're already good. I think it's our demons that drive us here: the most broken parts of us, the saddest, the ugliest, the loneliest, the most devilish. It's not the good in us that parades us proudly into this holy place on a Sunday morning. No, it's our most broken selves that bring us here, often against our own wills, seeking something more than we find in our daily worlds. We don't come to church because we are healthy, or happy, or secure. We come here because our demons drag us here, begging to be heard, to be healed, to be made well. Even on the best of days, our sensible, religious, decent selves might fail to see who Jesus is. But our unclean spirits know him. Everything in us that is broken and unholy, everything in us that is bad and wrong, everything in us that cries out like a demon for healing will recognize the power, the identity, the familiar face of Jesus. It is our unclean spirits that know him even when our proper selves don't.

But seriously, "unclean spirits"? Aren't we 21<sup>st</sup> century people? We modern professional clergypersons don't always know what to do with these old gospel texts about exorcisms. We tend to leave them alone. It's pretty clear that a lot of what ancient people attributed to demons was actually just undiagnosed mental illness. One report of demonic behavior in the gospels sounds suspiciously like an epileptic seizure. Ancient people had no concept of such ailments, so instead they spoke of demons or spirits. And so, when I make reference to our unclean spirits, I don't mean literal devils, but rather everything that ails us: our maladies, our recurring nightmares, our uncertainties and fears. Don't you think we're broken in the very spots where we once had the greatest dreams and hopes? Don't you think that even our brokenness is related to some great goodness that we cherish, deep down, that our demons are nothing more than—well—disappointed angels, longing to be made whole? "What are you doing here, Holy One? I know you!" We're old kindred from way back, you and I, even if I am in an awful state.

Do you remember that comedian from the 1980s, Sam Kinison? He was killed in a car accident in with cocaine in his system. I was not a fan. Kinison was an overweight man with long hair, who sported a beret. He was brash, and abrasive, and loud. When he did a comedy routine, he had the mannerisms of a Pentecostal preacher—shouting, pacing. That's because he was a Pentecostal preacher, until his faith disappointed him. And religion became the main topic of most of his comedy. His tombstone bears the inscription, "In another time and place, he would have been called a prophet."

It might be true. His scathing rebuke of religious bigotry might be the stuff of Amos, and Micah, and Joel. But he was also a bitter racist and misogynist. He once said, “I’m not scared of terrorists; I was married for two years.” But he saved his harshest attacks for religious faith, surely because it was something that he had loved so dearly, something he missed. The tragedy is that no one in his life modeled a more mature kind of faith, one that he could respect and grow into, instead of rejecting the whole notion of belief. If you scratch the surface of many of the people who hate religion most, the so-called “new atheists” especially, you’ll often find someone who has been deeply hurt or disappointed by a religious person or a religious institution. You’ll usually find someone who really wanted to believe in this stuff. And the degree of their negative feeling toward it is a pretty good measure of just how much they used to love it. The bigger the expectations, the bigger the hopes, the bigger the loves, as we all know, the harder they fall. But those fallen hopes still recognize each other at the bottom.

“What are you doing here? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” The question that the troubled spirit is really asking is this, “What are you doing...*here*, in my life, in my world, amid my boredoms and routines? I thought you’d given up on me. I thought I’d never see your familiar face again.” We may not all be Sam Kinison. We may not all be disappointed by faith. But there is something of *the broken holy* in each of us, and it will always cry out to Jesus with recognition. There is something of the disappointed angel in us all. There are old hurts that we’ve nursed for years. There are failures that we cannot let go. There are stillborn dreams of better selves and a better world. And all our capacity to work and wish for better things, however unfulfilled, is nothing less than a little glimmer of the divine, right here in ourselves. And even when those hopes are disappointed, they still recognize the wholeness that Jesus represents. Our troubled spirits see his familiar face from afar, and they draw us to him. Oh, the power of recognition! It is not our wholeness but our desire for wholeness that brings us toward him, for his wholeness sounds an old, old echo in our souls, reminding us that we, too, were created for harmony and joy, balance and peace.

All of this begs the obvious question: What are you doing here? The troubled spirit asked Jesus what he was doing in that dusty little synagogue in the Galilean outlands. And we might well ask you the same question: What are *you* doing *here*? Why do you come to church? When you sacrifice an hour or more on a Sunday morning to spend it in this place, what are you hoping to discover, or recover, or escape? There was a time when people made their ways to this hallowed place because being a proper church person gave their lives a nice air of sanctity. And you couldn’t be a respected public citizen without some respectable church affiliation—preferably in one of the historic Protestant denominations, like ours. My grandfather used to don a hat and tie whenever he went downtown. It didn’t matter if he was just going to the post office to buy stamps; you didn’t “go down street” without the proper attire. Church membership used to be as expected as a hat and tie when you went downtown. It was as standard as evening dress at the Duquesne Club. How could you trust an attorney, or a doctor, or a police officer, or a teacher who didn’t spend their Sunday mornings in a house of prayer? Times have changed, and now you don’t have to be a church person to be considered respectable. In fact, the behavior of some church people has given the whole enterprise a bad name, and now if you are a church member, you probably tend to keep it quiet just because you don’t want people to think that you’re a gay-basher or a Koran-burner.

A notoriously wicked man called for the minister just before he died. The man wanted to be baptized and received into the church, just in case there really was an afterlife. The minister went through the service for receiving members into the church, and when he came to the lines, “Do you renounce Satan and the ways of evil?” The dying man didn’t respond. The minister repeated the question a few times and finally got impatient. “Look, you can’t be received into the church until you renounce the devil,” he said. The dying man replied, “Until I know where I’m headed, I don’t think it’s a good idea to make anyone mad.” Demons and the devil play an interesting part in our popular imaginations. But those unclean spirits are little more than the various forms of discontentment that drive us to seek out something better.

So what brings you to this place today? What brought you last week? And since I’m hoping you’ll come back next week, what will bring you then? Habit? A familiar ritual? The desire to sit in a beautiful space? A quest for truth? A love of traditional hymns? Do you come here out of a simple wish to raise your children with a moral and spiritual core, hoping to give them a sense of place and identity in the big world all around? A lot of people simply come to church because they like the other people they find here. Yes, perhaps all those things and more bring you to this place. One thing that all churchgoers have in common is our mixed motives. We all have different reasons for giving up our Sunday mornings and coming here to church. None of us comes entirely out of love for God and neighbor. In the end, I think it’s safe to say that we come here because at some point in our lives, we discovered something life-giving and meaningful in church, and we return in hopes of rediscovering it each week. We’re like people standing at the baggage claim in the airport, scanning the crowd for the familiar face of a long-awaited relative or friend. We come here in search of a face we saw once, long ago, perhaps so long ago that we couldn’t even say when. Everything that isn’t perfect in us comes here in search of something that is. Sometimes we find it—or glimpses of it. And sometimes we go home disappointed. But oh, when we find it! It’s like chancing across an old friend on the other side of the world. It bears echoes of a faraway home that all of us sort of remember but none of us could really name. Our unclean spirits drive us here because we recognize that we need something more from life than we’re getting out there in the world. Everything in us that is broken brings us here seeking wholeness.

The life of faith is nothing more than a daily journey from emptiness toward fulfillment, from exile toward home, from bondage toward freedom, from illness toward health. This story from Mark seems to tell us that the life of faith is also a journey from a wounded, troubled spirit to a healed and whole spirit. And so come to this place as you are, who you are, with all your blemishes and your faults, all your doubts and your fears. No one is unacceptable here. But thank God for those troubled spirits that drive us to this place, that bring us into contact with such radical acceptance, such extravagant welcome. Thank God for those troubled spirits that drive us to seek out an old, familiar face—in the person of Jesus. And when we go from here, let our faces glow with an old familiarity and warmth to all the world around us. Let us, in our turn, be the faces of welcome, and acceptance, and home. Amen.