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# Knowledge and Power

Mark 1:21-28

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 29, 2012, by Dr. Adam Hollowell

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About this time eleven years ago I was sitting in a small classroom in the Religion Department next door fulfilling my freshman year seminar requirement. As was the practice then, and still is today, all first year students must take a seminar course of fifteen students or fewer, and I elected to take mine in on the topic of Protestants and American Culture. Professor Grant Wacker taught the course and we read a series of biographies on a number of prominent figures – Thomas Jefferson, Emily Dickinson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. On this particular occasion we had been assigned to read *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* by Allen Guelzo. And ... how can I say it delicately? *I hadn't done the reading.* I can't remember what kept me from it – was it some rush event or concert on campus? A basketball game, perhaps? We did win the national championship that year. Or maybe it was a calculus problem set? I had so much trouble with calculus ... yes, it *must've* been calculus. Well, whatever the reason, I hadn't done the reading and professor Wacker asked me directly in front of all the other students, "Adam, what did Abraham Lincoln think about the Bible?" I searched my mind for something – anything! – about Lincoln that might help answer the question. I had at least skimmed the pages, tried to acquaint myself with the book, but nothing was coming to mind. Suddenly it hit me – Lincoln never went to church until it was a political necessity. It's true, he attended irregularly and only to maintain a certain respectability as a candidate for public office. And if he didn't go to church he must not have cared much about the Bible. So I said, as confidently as I could, "Professor, he didn't know much of the Bible." There was a long pause. "Actually," the professor said, "Lincoln had nearly the whole thing memorized."

I would venture to guess that no matter what your station in life – be it student, professor, musician, social worker, parent – that you have had at least one moment similar to mine. An occasion where you've felt completely dwarfed and overwhelmed by your lack of knowledge. Maybe it was during that first meeting with the new boss, or when you gave that speech in front of the whole senior class. Maybe it was the time you rushed your newborn baby to the emergency room, only to find out she had a simple case of the hiccups.

These moments are so unsettling, so embarrassing. If you're like me, you think, "If only I'd read the book! If I'd just worked harder, or studied longer, or stayed up later. I could've prevented this from happening." The accumulation of knowledge becomes a shield against humiliation, against failure. It becomes a way to control the outcomes, guarantee the right result. When you've read every fundraising book in the library, that potential donor *has* to write the check this time. When you've selected the perfect schedule of courses, the perfect matrix of majors and minors and certificates, there's *no way* you'll make it to graduation day without a job offer. Wasn't it knowledge that got you here in the first place?

The early church had a word for this kind of belief. They called it Gnosticism. If you want to be saved, you have to be initiated into a special kind of knowledge – an elite teaching. That's Gnosticism. And if we're honest, that's a pretty attractive gospel to people like us. After all, where can you find more elite teaching than Duke University? This area has more PhDs per capita than anywhere else in the United States. I have a friend from Arkansas who calls Duke "Hollywood for academics." You never know when you might walk by a movie star. You'll never believe who sat next to me in the Refectory today ... Sam Wells! But just like Hollywood, for every blockbuster movie star there are a thousand starving actors waiting tables, writing grants, just waiting for the big break. Waiting to make it big. Around a place like this, knowledge just might be salvation. Knowledge is success. Knowledge is power.

And then here in the reading from Mark for today we find ourselves confronted with such a different gospel. Jesus casts an unclean spirit out of man, and the people in the synagogue say, "A new

teaching!” Why do they call it *teaching*? A miracle, perhaps, or a healing, or a wonder. But teaching? See, I thought we were getting a sermon. Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan and called the disciples away from their fishing nets. They enter Capernaum and Jesus goes to the *synagogue* on the *Sabbath*. This is *the* teaching moment. Give us a new interpretation of the prophet Isaiah, maybe a parable about fish, or flowers, or sons and daughters. But in this scene Jesus isn’t even the one doing most of the talking. This spirit shows up out of nowhere, saying, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know you who are, the Holy One of God.” Jesus says, “Be silent, and come out of him!” But notice that the spirit is the opposite of quiet – shouting in a loud voice as it leaves the man. The people in the synagogue see all of this and say, “A new teaching – With power! What a strange description.

It’s almost as if Mark is saying that this good news Jesus brings – this gospel – has to be experienced before it can be explained. That you have to participate, get swept up in, be carried away by this gospel long before it’s a parable or a three point sermon. Jesus is no Gnostic teacher, and this gospel is certainly not only for the elite. As we have already witnessed with the calling of the disciples, God’s salvation is available to anyone who is willing to follow. This new teaching, this new power, it is first and foremost a call: “I will make you fish for people. Come. Follow me.”

Notice in the synagogue that when the unclean spirit shouts, “I know who you are.” Jesus does not return knowledge for knowledge. He does not say, “Well, I know who *you* are.” This encounter with evil is not a battle of knowledge. The confession of the unclean spirit is a true confession – Jesus is the Holy One of God. But Jesus seems more interested in spreading good news and releasing the captives than in making sure he is rightly identified. It’s almost as if there’s something about knowledge that Jesus wants to avoid. As if knowledge presents some kind of temptation, or that it’s malleable to the point of distortion. Jesus simply says to the spirit, “Shut up, and leave that poor man alone.” And the people are amazed.

The great Southern preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of being in the fourth grade in rural Tennessee. It was the late 1930s. He was in Miss Katherine’s class – intelligent, beautiful, attentive, wonderful Miss Katherine. Helped everyone with arithmetic, all the students loved her. And as a young boy he was absolutely devastated when the rumors about Miss Katherine started spreading. They were all over town – everyone was talking about it. He absolutely refused to believe it – it could not be true! Such a scandal! The word was, the rumor had it, *Miss Katherine had her ears pierced*. Craddock says, “In that little village in east Tennessee, we knew what it meant when a woman had her ears pierced. If there was anything revelatory of character – anything indicative of behavior – it had to be having your ears pierced. We all knew what kind of person she really was. We all knew what she did when she went to town. *We knew. We knew.*”<sup>1</sup>

How shall we say it? Knowledge so easily becomes ... judgmental. It becomes an advantage, a power, an upper hand. Knowledge can be a technology for control, for persuasion, for leverage. Of course this can be intellectual knowledge about history, and science, and literature, and whether or not Abraham Lincoln memorized the Bible. But it’s more than that. It’s also social knowledge – about structures of power and symbols of status, and most importantly, knowledge about other people – from who writes the best recommendation letter to who has the highest salary in the neighborhood to who got their ears pierced (or whatever the contemporary equivalent). And suddenly it seems like we are playing a game where the goal is to acquire as much of all these different kinds of knowledge as we can. *All the while yielding as little knowledge of ourselves as possible.* “No one needs to know about *that* side of my family.” “Please don’t tell anyone that I am going to counseling.” “Kids these days, they put so much on Facebook, it’s a wonder any of them will get jobs.” The message is: “Don’t reveal too much of yourself. There will be consequences.”

It seems to me that the most fragile moments of any new or deepening relationship are those when you’ve just shared something very private, very personal, and you don’t quite know how the other

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, “The Reclaiming of One’s Past,” *Chapel Sermons*.

person will handle this new information. As soon as they leave, you think, should I have done that? I shouldn't have done that. What if they tell everyone? No, they'd never betray my trust. What if they betray my trust? And when you get burned by someone's mishandling of your darkest or most intimate stories, the sense of shame and regret can be completely overwhelming. Even in moments as simple as getting the wrong answer in a freshman seminar, suddenly your face is red and warm, your palms are sweaty and that knot tightens in your stomach. It's that realization that you've been exposed.

That anguish, that fear, whether it comes in therapy, or in the dorm, or in the doctor's office, it has everything to do with knowledge. It has everything to do with what other people know about the emptiest and most shameful parts of our lives. This force that we thought would be our power and our salvation, knowledge, has suddenly become a force of destruction. It threatens to ruin us. And when God enters the equation – a God that knows every moment of our past, every thought that crosses our mind, every dark and hidden place – that threat of that much knowledge is too much to handle. A God that knows this much, a God that knows *everything*, certainly that God will destroy us. We cannot imagine that God would do anything else.

And thus the unclean spirit's question for Jesus in the synagogue hits painfully close to home. "Have you come here to destroy us?" We plead with God to drive away injustice and oppression and banish all that is shameful and broken. Cast out the unclean spirits of the world and destroy them forever, we pray. But we fear in our gut that we will not survive such an encounter. If God destroys all that is evil, will there be anything left of you? Will there be anything left of me? Ever since that dark day in the garden we have been trying to hide ourselves from God's knowledge – trying to cover our nakedness with fig leaves. But the unclean spirit makes no attempt to hide from Jesus. It seems to know that with this much power, this much authority, this much knowledge, there's going to be a violent end. It is a fight to the death.

We stand with bated breath in the synagogue, waiting to see what will happen. Who will be destroyed? Is it the unclean spirit? Is it us? ... It's Jesus.

The demon's question is cruel irony. We will destroy the Holy One of God. All of our knowledge, our quest for power, domination, and control, our desire to wring salvation from our own hands, will build and accumulate until we cry, "Crucify him!" The Holy One of God is the one who goes to the cross. Jesus witnesses to the reality that God's knowledge of creation is irrevocably personal. It is the helplessness of a baby in the manger, surrounded by snorting animals. It is the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine around a table with friends. It is the broken body on the cross, bridging that precarious distance between heaven and earth.

But our destruction of Christ is not the end. The power of the resurrection is that we may live into a new way of knowing. In Christ we are called neither to forgo knowledge, nor to condemn it. Knowledge is no longer a mechanism for control, fodder for judgment, or a strategy for the upper hand. We are called to know as Christ has known us. Christ is the one who loves his enemies, who prays for those who persecute him, who turns the other cheek. He is the one who washes the feet of those who will betray him. This new way of knowing is for us the surrender of the self to the transforming power of the crucified one. It is participation in God's cross-shaped knowledge of his creation.

We are a people so easily tricked into thinking that knowledge is power, and power is salvation. In that synagogue in Capernaum, confronted by the unclean spirit, Jesus offers a new way of knowing. As the one on his way to destruction, he cast the unclean spirit out of the man, banishing his brokenness and liberating him to new life. He does this also for you. The way of Christ is knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sin. It is the power of the suffering servant. And all the people said, "A new teaching – with authority!" Thanks be to God. Amen.