

January 28, Epiphany 4B (Mark 1:21-28)

Reading about Jesus in Capernaum, I think about a man I met in Tijuana.

by [Ismael Ruiz-Millán](#) in the [January 3, 2018](#) issue

In Tijuana, Mexico, at El Parque del Mapa (the Park of the Map), I approached a man to ask if he wanted a meal. I introduced myself as a pastor. “I killed several people just for fun,” he screamed at me, “and if I want to, I can kill you right now in front of all these people!”

As I think back to this encounter, I feel the shivers in my body again. After what felt like a long pause, I responded like this: “I don’t know why you did all that, but please know that God loves you, and because I have experienced God’s love in my own life, I can tell you that I love you too.”

This made him more upset. He started screaming in despair, “No! No, that is not possible. I am a bad person; no one can love me!”

“Yes,” I said, “God loves you, and I love you.” Miraculously, the man’s demeanor changed drastically. He held my arms and then started to cry.

I asked if he would allow me to pray with him, and he consented. Did he have a specific concern or request? “Pray for my family. I have not seen them in years, and I don’t think I will see them again.” I prayed, and when I finished he left without a word.

Across the street from El Parque del Mapa there used to be a place called El Bordo, an area underneath a bridge (now demolished) where deportees went after multiple failed attempts to cross back to the United States. Many people who used to live in El Bordo—and who are now spread all over downtown Tijuana—are socially dead even though they’re physically alive. Matthew Suárez, a journalist from San Diego, called this place “the Bridge of Doom.” Despair, hopelessness, anger, and a tangibly oppressive environment are what I experienced when I was there—the power of evil was evident.

I wonder if this is what Jesus experiences in Capernaum, as this man with an unclean spirit stands in front of him, screaming at him. Jesus is teaching in a synagogue, and the audience is in awe. There is something special about this teacher and his teaching, and people are just astounded. But the audience includes this man who screams at Jesus. What he says does not make sense: “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.”

Jesus’ response is bold and clear, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit leaves the tormented man alone. After this encounter, Jesus’ popularity increases significantly.

My encounter with the man in Tijuana lasted for about four minutes, but it felt like 30 or more. It sort of happened in slow motion. I wonder if time passed in slow motion for the other hundreds of people there as well—though they may have wanted it to pass quickly. They may have just wanted whatever was causing such an oppressive environment to leave them alone.

The tension is real when we are faced with evil forces. It’s a situation in which a new teaching is needed. That’s what keeps Jesus’ audience in awe—the new way in which he is teaching. Now, we need to be careful in defining this “new teaching.” The temptation with this text is to say that Jesus’ new teaching is about casting demons out or being sure to teach with authority. It’s an appealing idea, teaching with authority, and it sounds exciting to be in the exorcism business. But I do not think that this is the new teaching Jesus’ audience is impressed by. The situation requires more than boldness and authority—it requires compassion.

What Jesus does is to refuse to ignore this man. Jesus listens to what he has to say—and even though it is something negative, something that jeopardizes his own ministry, Jesus shows that he really cares, and he delivers the man. To put it differently, it is not about what Jesus says or how well he articulates it; it’s about what he actually does. Since this man was already in the synagogue, I wonder if the religious leaders had seen him there before, screaming nonsense, and just kept teaching—rather than trying to determine what was keeping this man in such a state.

In this text, we see Jesus approach the unapproachable. He shows us that we have to confront evil forces. He makes it clear that we need to pay attention and listen, even to those who make us uncomfortable or who clearly want to harm us. Jesus

shows us in this text how important it is to care for those who are tormented and oppressed by evil. Ultimately, the challenge is to pay attention to the evil that surrounds us, in both its individual and social expression, and to confront it with compassion, just like Jesus did.