

A New Spirit
Mark 1:21-28

I've been talking about fresh starts for the past few weeks. We talked about how circumstances have resulted in fresh starts for the world, for our nation and for our church. Last week I talked about fresh starts for us as individuals. This morning I want to talk about people who need a fresh start, but who will not get it from a change in circumstances. They cannot get a fresh start until they get a new spirit.

I was in the nursery the other day, just enjoying watching the children play. Two of the children were sitting together. They had a set of those large blocks—the big cardboard blocks. They were working together to stack them. Very carefully they placed one block on top on the other. They were almost finished. They could only reach high enough to put one more block on the stack. There was a little guy sitting by himself off to the side, watching all this. The higher the stack grew the more fascinated he became with it. And you know what happened. As the two were struggling to carefully place that last block, this little guy hopped up and ran across the room and kicked the bottom out from under the stack.

As I watched this event unfold, I thought, “This is a snapshot of the human race.” Human beings are driven by two powerful and contradictory impulses. One is the impulse to build up and the compulsion to tear down.

Jesus came to build something up. He came to build the Kingdom of God, in which all people love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength and love their neighbors as themselves. In the Kingdom of God all people live and work together in peace and harmony, because all of them understand and obey the will of God.

Jesus was in the synagogue at Capernaum building a little part of this Kingdom. As he taught the people, they were enthralled at the beauty of the vision of God's plan and purpose for them which Jesus drawing for them. They were amazed at the power and authority of his words. There was a feeling of transcendence in that room, as they all felt that they were being lifted into the very presence of God, which is exactly what was happening.

One young man was sitting there watching what was happening, and he couldn't stand it. Something extraordinary was being built, and he absolutely could not control the compulsion to tear it down. So, he stood up and started screaming at Jesus.

It must have taken a few moments for the people to understand what was happening. They had been mesmerized by Jesus' words. They were soaring in the heavens. Suddenly they tumbled back to earth, the magic of the moment was being destroyed by the screaming antics of this crazy fellow.

When I was a boy, my father and I started playing chess together. At first it wasn't anything too serious. He was just teaching me how to play. But he was a good teacher and eventually he and I both realized I knew as much about chess as he did. The games became more and more serious. One day, without actually saying it, we both knew the game we played that day would be “the game.” We would both put our complete concentration and our best efforts into that game, something which would

probably never happen again. We would determine once and for all which of us was the champion chess player of the Welborn family. So, the game began. Each of us had a good beginning. We phased into the middle part of the game. We were at the point when the next move or two would decide which direction the game would break and who would have the advantage for the rest of the game. We were so deep in concentration that the chess board was the only thing we were aware of. There was nothing else. One of my brothers couldn't stand it. He loved attention, and he wasn't getting any. He decided to break into our chess universe by tossing the box lid of the chess game at my head. He missed. The lid slid over the board perfectly, completely wiping it clean of all the pieces. My father and I sat there staring at the board, still contemplating our next moves, not comprehending why there were no more pieces on the board. I played a rerun through my head and it showed an object flying across the board. Slowly but surely my father and I came back to earth and realized what had happened. We looked around to see where this object had come from, just in time to see my brother running from the room, screaming for mercy.

The parishioners must have felt like my father and me, as they slowly came down to earth.

When I read this story, a couple of questions come to mind. First of all, where were the ushers? The people of that community knew one another. They knew this boy had a problem with being disruptive and out of control. There are things that can be done in situations like this. I remember when a young man came to church one Sunday morning. He was disheveled and had a wild, blank look in his eyes. He walked all the way down the center aisle and sat down on the floor in front of the first pew. Everyone was watching him, wondering what to expect. It was obvious the boy was not in his right mind. The ushers had a fierce debate about whether to ask him to leave, or to tell him to sit on a pew (both of which would have disrupted the service), or to leave him alone and pray he didn't do anything else that would be a distraction. Finally the head usher said, "I'll take care of this." He walked down a side aisle to the front of the church, knelt down and shook the young man's hand, handed him a bulletin and sat down beside him. The two of them sat quietly together through the rest of the service. That usher had the situation well in control. I guess the ushers at the synagogue in Capernaum just weren't that clear thinking.

A second question that comes to mind is, what was going on in the mind of that young man? My guess is that he was at war with himself, that there was a part of himself which saying, "Sit down and shut up. Don't make a spectacle of yourself."

I'll bet that if that teacher asked the little fellow who knocked down the blocks why he did that, he would have said, "I don't know." I am certain he didn't know why he did it. I am certain that he didn't even want to do it and was immediately sorry for what he had done. He felt the impulse to tear down what the other children were building, and he couldn't resist it.

The young man in the synagogue probably didn't want to scream at Jesus. But he couldn't stop himself. The impulse to tear down what Jesus was building was too strong. He probably came to that service that morning because he was sick and tired of being out of control and being a slave to his compulsion to destroy.

The impulse to tear down can be very strong. All of us have it. And all of us give in to it from time to time. The wise thing to do is to choose ways of expressing our

compulsion to tear down in ways that are not harmful. Playing games is a way to act out without really harming anyone.

Today is the Super Bowl. When I played football, they always put me on the offense. I was a running back. But I really wanted to be on the defense. The offense always had these beautiful plays which they had carefully planned and practiced. They were trying to create something which required great skill and perfect timing. But when I put on those pads, the last thing I wanted was to be disciplined and careful. I wanted to knock somebody down. I wanted to tear something up. I always wanted to be the one to attack and destroy what the other team was doing. Of course, I only weighed 120 pounds, so the coaches were right to try to make me a running back. But it didn't work, because I had the impulses of defensive linebacker in the body of an offensive running back.

In real life most of us do not express impulse to destroy by literally knocking things down, like that little boy in the nursery, or knocking people down, like football players, although there are some who do that. They usually end up in jail. Most people do not express destructive impulses by screaming at people, like the demon-possessed man in the synagogue at Capernaum, although that sometimes happens too. I was once warned when I went to a new church that I should be prepared. At times the organist had actually stopped the worship service and had a conniption fit over something which angered her. Thank God she never had a fit while I was there.

No, mature, civilized people don't scream insanely. Often we whisper our destructive words to others. Or we couch them in calmly reasoned words, "Now, let's be reasonable. You know that what you are trying to do is impractical. It simply can't be done."

These quietly spoken, calm words are often more destructive than the screaming of someone who is out of his mind.

Many of you all have heard me say before that I love critics. Critics serve a vital role in the church and in every group and organization. Critics are the people who have the courage to say, "The way we are doing things may not be the best way to do them. Please consider the possibility that what we are doing is not good, or at least not the best." Critics are not enemies of the impulse to build things up. They are devoted to helping the group do a better job of building. The prophets have always been critics.

But there are people who masquerade as critics and prophets who are in reality simply enemies of the impulse to build. They are driven by the impulse to tear things down. How can you tell the difference between a critic and an obstructionist? A critic will encourage the builders to look for a better way, and when they find it, he or she will join them in the building. A true critic is moved by the impulse to build.

An obstructionist simply criticizes. Nothing you do will please them, except to stop trying to do anything at all. Whatever you try to build up, they will try to tear down.

Because tearing down is usually easier than building up, often they succeed.

But Jesus cannot and will not be defeated by the impulse to tear down. Jesus was not about to allow that young man to destroy what he had built that day. Instead he used him to put the finishing touch to his monument to God's grace and power which he had built that day with his words. By the authority of his words he freed the boy from the destructive impulse which had controlled him for so long. He transformed him from a destroyer to a builder. When the people saw what Jesus did to for the young man, they

were even more astounded than they had been before the scene the young man had created. The evil power which had controlled that young man did not destroy the awe of that Sabbath morning in the synagogue. It only served to make it even more awesome.

Those who take pleasure destroying and tearing down had better stay away from Jesus. But those who want to be freed from the destructive impulse should do exactly what this young man did. Sit at the feet of Jesus. He can transform our hearts, and when our hearts are transformed, our words will be transformed.

James says that anyone can bridle his tongue is has achieved perfection. But the truth is that you can't bridle your tongue unless your heart is right. As Jesus said, "The words that come out of our mouths are the overflow of our hearts." If we have evil in our hearts, our words will reveal that evil.

We can't change our hearts. Only Christ can. We will get a fresh start when we ask Jesus to give us a new spirit.

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