After hearing the story of what happened in that synagogue in Capernaum, we can be thankful that things here at Pinegrove are a bit more, um, “composed”. Nobody stands up and yells or throws things at the preacher, nobody takes their clothes off, nobody falls onto the floor in convulsions.

On the other hand, maybe some of here think it might not be such a bad thing if something dramatic happened, maybe on one of those days when we wonder if there is a pulse at all; days when we wonder whether we are making any difference at all with what we do here – something dramatic like what happened in the synagogue at Capernaum (just don’t get any ideas, okay?).
But really, how would we respond if someone angry disrupted our service?

Getting back to Mark, it must have been one wild ride for the first disciples Jesus called. We started reading Mark’s gospel only 5 weeks ago, but so far we’ve only made it to verse 20 in the first chapter. So much is happening!
Remember what Randy said last week about Mark’s favourite word? Right: “immediately”. Well, in those mere 20 verses, Mark has already said “immediately” three times. Only last week Jesus called his first disciples, and “immediately” they left their boats and nets and followed him. With Mark, things happen in a hurry, there’s this sense of urgency.

Mark does not say how much (or little) time passed between the moment they followed Jesus, and the incident in Capernaum. Did this incident also happen “immediately”, on the disciples’ very first Sabbath together with Jesus? We don’t know if they’d been able to complete their discipleship orientation and received Presbytery certification. We don’t even know if they’d finished their discernment process as outlined in the United Church Manual!

But joking aside, doesn’t it make you wonder exactly what happened in the synagogue? Was Jesus the guest reader or preacher, or was he in the crowd being disruptive himself, making points no one had ever heard? Were they amazed by what he said or did – or were they upset? What was it that made emotions to go sky-high, such that the man with the unclean spirit erupted in an angry confrontation?
Which begs another question: what was a man with an unclean spirit doing in synagogue, anyway? Let’s not be distracted by the images of spinning heads and spewing green vomit that we see in the movies; up to this point the man must have looked harmless enough to enter in and participate in the service like everybody else. In fact, Capernaum wasn’t that big a town, so people probably knew this man.

Which then raises the even more interesting question...: what kind of spirits have we brought with us to church today? Have we come here with afflictions of body or mind or spirit?

Hearing this 2000-year old story we have to remind ourselves that in those days anything that people found scary, or intimidating or just plain weird, was explained as the work of a spirit. The world was full of spirits who made thunder and lightning, who made the earth quake, who made the sun or moon go dark – and who possessed people, explaining their ranting or screaming, or hearing voices. Nowadays we know a bit more about mental illnesses, but in those days it was all the work of a spirit (probably because you or someone in your family had offended God in some way). So we’ve come a long way since then.

But what hasn’t changed, is that it can still feel like we’re in the grip of a spirit-demon. People who are fighting addiction often say that it feels like they are possessed by the demon of alcohol or drugs or gambling or pornography. You don’t even have to have an addiction problem to feel like demons control your life. We might find ourselves in church today, fighting the demons of anxiety, or shame, or anger, or guilt, or bitterness or depression, you name it. That brings it a lot closer to home, doesn’t it?

So what about our spirit is “unclean”? What is holding us in its grip, hurting us, hurting our relationship with others, even our relationship with the Holy?

The bad news is, we all have problems and baggage, and I’m no exception; and we bring that baggage everywhere we go, including right here to church. The Good News is this: whatever it is we bring with us here to church, it’s OK. It is not only OK, it is the right thing to bring your problems to our church community. Because our God is a God of the broken, and our church is a fellowship of the needy. Our God brings healing where there’s brokenness, not because we deserve it, but because God loves us for who we are, warts and all. And boy, do we have warts. The only thing God asks us to do is to fess up, to acknowledge our pain and our failings; to acknowledge that we cannot fix ourselves, not matter how hard we try – or how good we are at fooling ourselves.

I invite you to think of those places of brokenness and disappointment, or shame and fear that you have in your life. I invite you to come clean about them – to yourself and God.
I know, it’s not easy to do, it can be pretty uncomfortable and confronting, but that’s the point. It’s only when we are painfully aware of our flaws and failings, that we realize that there’s no way we fix ourselves, but need all the help we can get; God’s help. A God who knows us through and through, and loves us anyway.

A God who is patiently waiting to be allowed into our places of brokenness and pain, reassuring us, loving us, healing us, and offering us a peace that’s beyond all understanding.

But it doesn’t stop there! Once God is at work in us, we’ll start to see the world in a different light. We can’t help but notice the brokenness that’s all around us, in someone in our family, or among our friends, or in the neighbourhood, or in your family of faith. And we start to feel God tugging at us, nudging us to work through us to help restore others to new life. God is still casting out the unclean spirits, and sometimes – much to our surprise – God chooses to use us to help do it, just like Jesus showed us.

I know, that’s pretty heavy stuff, isn’t it? So let me tell you a story of something that happened to me during my years in seminary. It’s an intensive time during which the students get to know each other very intimately, sharing things maybe even our parents or siblings don’t even know. This particular story is about two of my fellow students; for privacy reasons, let’s call them “Chris” and “Marge”.

One morning, in a class about substance abuse, “Chris” quietly began to talk about his own struggle with an addiction to painkillers and cocaine. A few years before he had hit rock bottom, losing his home, his spouse, his job, and his self-respect. He was clean now, but knew that it wouldn’t take much for him to spiral down into that black hole again. He was painfully honest – and scared as hell.

On a different occasion, “Marge” told me of her horrific past of emotional, physical and sexual abuse by her foster parents. It had left her permanently damaged, always having to fight feelings of profound shame and worthlessness. She was not able to sustain a long-term relationship, and suffered serious depressions.

And in both cases I remember thinking to myself: really?! You want to become a minister? You think you got what it takes to provide reliable leadership to a congregation? Might just as well sign up a person with a fear of heights for pilot training! It’s just not a good idea.

That was about 5 years ago. Fast-forward to the present, and Chris is now working in Vancouver’s downtown Eastside, notorious for its rampant drug use, poverty, mental illness, prostitution, homelessness, and violent crime. He has an amazing ministry there for the people that society has given up on: vagrants, junkies, hookers, crooks. He is respected by the people he seeks to serve, because they know he has been there himself. He knows what it’s like to lose almost everything to
the demon of addiction. In his blog he tells about God’s very real presence and the miracles that happen in the middle of the squalor, pain and self-destruction.

And Marg, she is now counselling women with a history of abuse and struggling with depression low self-esteem. And like Chris, she also does amazing work because she has lived that hell herself. It took them both a long time with many setbacks, but they came through – because they allowed God to enter into their brokenness and get to work there, uncomfortable and even painful as it was.

It was a powerful lesson in humility for me. Looking back, I now realize that, one: I had judged them. Sure, I felt for them and empathized, but I also thought they were just not equipped for the ministry, didn’t have the right stuff. All that baggage of theirs would just be like an albatross around their necks and drag them down.

And two: I had conveniently overlooked God in all this. I mean, it was as clear as the big nose on my face that Chris and Marge were just not up to it, right? And in a way I was right, they weren’t; and they knew it. But they also knew something I had yet to learn: that God couldn’t care less about what we think is impossible – if you allow God in...

Chris and Marge seem to be at home among afflicted spirits and people in the grip of their personal demons. They are not upset when someone in their group starts to scream or throw things at them. Instead, they would welcome them and offer them a place to spend the night. They have experienced God’s healing power for themselves, and are now working for others to have that same life-restoring experience. And if they could do it, we can do it too.

That’s what Jesus did that day in Capernaum. That’s what it means to be church, points Mark out – not only in word but in deed: that Jesus has come to oppose all the forces that keep us, God’s children, from living into our God-given potential.

So if that was the case in that synagogue in Capernaum long ago, wouldn’t it still be the case today as well: that God desires the best for all of us, and stands in opposition to anything and everything that robs us of that joy and belonging and purpose for which we were created, whether those things come from inside of us or outside of us.

This is the God I believe in, the God I reluctantly allow into the dark areas of my life. It worked miracles for Chris, for Marge, for me. It can also work miracles for you.

Amen!
Mark 1:21-28 (A man with an unclean spirit is healed in Capernaum)

21 Jesus and his disciples went to the town of Capernaum. When the Sabbath day came, he went into the synagogue and began to teach. 22 The people were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law.

23 Suddenly, a man in the synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, 24 “Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

25 But Jesus reprimanded him. “Be quiet! Come out of the man,” he ordered. 26 At that, the evil spirit screamed, threw the man into a convulsion, and then came out of him.

27 Amazement gripped the audience, and they began to discuss what had happened. “What sort of new teaching is this?” they asked excitedly. “It has such authority! Even evil spirits obey his orders!” 28 The news about Jesus spread quickly throughout the entire region of Galilee.