

Speaking of demons

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Mark 1: 21-28

This fall and winter I have been working with Jamie to lay out the preaching topics for at least 5 to 6 weeks in advance. This is so we can coordinate music with scripture and the sermon. However sometimes things happen that upset those plans. I was going to preach today on the 1 Corinthians passage. It is about leadership and setting an example for others in the church and seemed a very timely topic. In other words how church leaders and members can present to the world a church that looks like the kingdom of God. That is certainly something that currently does not happen often enough.

However several events and a couple of meditations that I read earlier this week have sent me in a very different direction and right back to our gospel. I have been talking about listening to the Spirit and I have learned when I get hit repeatedly with the message, preach this passage Mark, I listen.

Many preachers avoid today's Gospel passage. They may work with the first few verses. Mark 1:21 "They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." And then stop before the healing of the man in the synagogue with the demon.

Now these are two very important verses and well worth a sermon on their own. Jesus is teaching with a very different authority, one that is centered on love and not law. The problem for many people is in the rest of the passage. The tendency is to skip over the challenging topic of demons and the healing of demons that make up the bulk of today's readings. However Wednesday night the bible study watched a dramatic telling of the first half of Mark and I was struck by the prominent place of demons in Mark's gospel. That is one of the advantages of reading or listening to scripture in large chunks, you catch themes that are missed in the weekly lectionary readings. Demons are very important to Mark.

Demons or Satan are mentioned four times in just the first chapter of Mark. There are 11 healing stories in Mark, four of those healings are deliverance from demons and all in the first half of the gospel. In all of them the demon recognizes Jesus even when the people and the disciples do not.

The belief in demons and demonic possession was very common up until the enlightenment and by the early 20th century C. S. Lewis wrote that the devil's greatest victory is that nobody believes in him anymore. As a person involved in healing

ministries I have done considerable work and training on the healing of many different things and the one that bothered me the most was the talk of demons. My teachers however said anybody doing healing ministry must be prepared and I discovered they were right.

Now I am not going to go into the stories of the three different times I encountered what I can only describe as something so evil and black that demon seems to be the only word for it. That doesn't change the fact that I totally believe in some sort of terrible evil that can "possess" someone for lack of a better word. If you want to talk to me about this, I'm happy to do this, but not from the pulpit.

However what is important is to realize that "demons" may take many forms. How many times we think what are the "demons" that would possess someone to do whatever. Look at the news just this week. It could be the two school shootings this week or the horrific spectacle of 160 women and girls testifying about being abused by that MSU gymnastics doctor. Not to mention those who turned a blind eye to what he was doing. What I was thinking about watching the evening news replay that awful testimony is not only how terrible what he did was and what were his demons, but what has this done to these girls? What demons has he left behind in them? This is true for all of the victims of abuse that have been in the news the past several days and years.

A meditation came across my email on Tuesday by Pastor Steve Garness-Holmes that shed some light on all of this especially for the victims.

I like the ancient wisdom that distinguishes
between the person and the spirit that inhabits them.
You are not the unholy spirit you have inherited.
You are still you.

An "unclean" spirit is one outside religious law.
Don't you have in you the residue of some infractions?
Imagine this: it's not evil. It's shame.
But it's not you.

Your shame recognizes the Holy One,
who has indeed come to destroy it.
It will not leave you without making you cry out.
But it will leave.

Imagine this: Jesus has power over your shame,
authority over what diminishes or misleads you,
power to cast it out, to restore you to yourself,
to set you free.¹

¹ <https://www.unfoldinglight.net>

Shame, hatred, anger, pain are all demons that can inhabit us, but they are not us. As a Safe Church trainer for the diocese and before that the President of a Teacher's Union I have dealt with a lot of this stuff. I never do a training where I do not have at least a half dozen victims in attendance, some of whom only admit for the first time in that safe space. The hope comes in that last bit that Pastor Steve wrote, "Jesus has the power and authority over what diminishes or misleads you, power to cast it out, to restore you to yourself, to set you free."

So what can we do about this? On this fourth Sunday when we do healing prayers I am aware that a common prayer that I say is "may Jesus take away from you all that is not of God." This is what Pastor Steve is talking about. Now the part about abuse is in the news, but there are many other things that can cause us to carry pain that is not us; is not from God or of God.

Fr. Nigel Mumford at Galilee is a renowned healer and offers courses in healing prayer. Jeremy Stowell has completed the first two courses in healing that Nigel offers and this is why I have added him to our healing team. He has as much training as I have and is very good at what he does. Nigel also offers a potent healing ministry for returning soldiers and sailors as well as vets who still carry the scars of war. A big piece of his healing prayer work is lifting the burden that many of them carry from combat.

Jesus can free all of us from those "demons" that we all carry because they are not of God, but rather something God can take away. Any number of people have said, "Well I've got a person that hurt me and I can't seem to get past that grudge, that hatred." Well that is a demon that many carry. As we move towards Lent, this is a very good time to take a look at those issues.

One thing you can do is use our Labyrinth. Find something to represent that person, that hurt, that event and carry it with you as you go into the Labyrinth. Walk slowly and pray what ever seems right, but focus on offering that up to God, or to Jesus. When you reach the center, set whatever you have carried in down at the base of the tree or if indoors the center of the Labyrinth and leave it there. Then as you slowly walk your way out, thank God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit for taking this burden from you. It may take more than one time, in fact it probably will, but I have found it very effective. However many cannot do it without some help, so do not be afraid to ask. We have healers and spiritual directors in our congregation who can help walk you through this.

The other thing is using the Rite of Reconciliation and Lent is a perfect time to prepare for and do this. This is our form of individual confession except I don't assign you Hail Mary's and Our Fathers. However if you carry the demon that is focused on something someone did to you, there is also a form that allows you to work towards forgiveness of the one who has hurt you. I have done this a couple of times and it is very powerful, both as the person receiving the Rite and as the one

leading the Rite. This does take some preparation, which is why Lent is such a good time to do this. Feel free to ask me about this privately.

Finally let me close with the second prayer written by Pastor Steve on Thursday of this week:

God, I do not know what burdens people carry,
what demons they wrestle with silently,
what triumph it may for them to appear normal,
to be decent, to show up.

Give me compassion for each person,
aware that spirits haunt us all.

Give me grace to bless and not to judge,
to heal and not to hurt,
even those who invite hurting.

Free me from my own demons,
my ego and its demands on myself and others.

I do not know another's inner story,
its landscape, its dark places, its villains.

I don't know; I don't need to know.

I only know your tremendous love
even for me, and equally for them.

Help me remember. AMEN