

## YOU CAN'T FILL A VACUUM WITH NOTHING!

(10/14/18)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 12:22, 33-37, 43-45

Luke 11:24-26

*“When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.” (Luke 11:24-26)*

The scripture reading this morning, sometimes referred to as the parable of the empty house, has always been a difficult teaching for me to understand. This morning I would like to take a crack at it from the perspective of the mission we support this month: Straight Ahead Ministries. If we look at what it might be saying to young men and women who have become caught up in the juvenile justice system, it might also teach us something about ourselves and our own spiritual journey.

As you note, the passage is almost identical in Matthew and Luke. It does not appear in Mark or John. Mark was the first of the gospels to be written. Matthew and Luke, who worked independently, each had a copy of Mark in front of them when they compiled their gospels fifteen or twenty years later. We know this because there are passages of scripture in Matthew and Luke that are almost identical to a passage in Mark.

There is material in Matthew that is not in Luke, e.g., the story of the wise men. There are passages in Luke that are not in Matthew, e.g., the Annunciation. But there are passages in both Matthew and Luke that are almost identical. This morning’s scripture is one of them.

How could this be, since we know that Matthew and Luke wrote independently out of their own church traditions? It is because they had a copy of another gospel in front of them. They each drew from this gospel, a “lost” gospel, which biblical scholars call “Q”. If you want to do something special and also make a lot of money, all you have to do is find Q! There are many people who would like to know what is in this gospel, especially if there is anything that both Matthew and Luke decided to leave out!

The passage describes an exorcism. Jesus has driven a demon out of a man who was blind and mute. Jesus tells his followers that when a demon has been driven out it wanders. The demon will not find rest in “waterless places” because, according to Jewish

folklore, demons like water. However, in Isaiah 13:21, we learn that demons can live in any deserted places. When Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, is overthrown, it

*will be like Sodom and Gomorrah  
when God overthrew them.  
It will never be inhabited  
or lived in for all generations;  
Arabs will not pitch their tents there,  
shepherds will not make their flocks lie down there.  
But wild animals will lie down there,  
and its houses will be full of howling creatures;  
there ostriches will live,  
and there goat-demons will dance.  
Hyenas will cry in its towers,  
and jackals in the pleasant palaces;  
its time is close at hand,  
and its days will not be prolonged.*

Jesus tells us that the unclean spirit, which has been exorcized, wanders in a waterless wilderness. The person appears to have served as the demon's house. In fact, the demon refers to the person as "my house." This indicates a high degree of ownership. The demon appears to have possessed the person or taken over the person's life.

How can we understand this biblical reference to demons in our understanding of the psyche? The demon may be some form of mental illness. It may be an addiction. It could be descriptive of what Jung called a complex, e.g., an inferiority complex that can possess a person and shape his/her life in a dramatic way. It may describe a narcissistic personality disorder with its accompanying attitude of selfishness and self-centeredness. It may refer to the power of anger that spins out of control. When a person is under the influence of a demon, he/she is off-center; he/she is far from the kingdom of God.

The scripture passage implies that the demonic not only has a power; it has an ontological status: it is an independent reality. When it possesses a person, that person's life and relationships are under the control of the demon; they are not guided by God.

When the exorcised demon cannot find a suitable habitation, it not only returns to its original home, it comes back with a vengeance. This is an apt description of the power of sin, the experience of being or living off-center, if we can use that term to refer to the conditions we just mentioned. Although it has been driven out, it returns again and again.

In the picture Jesus presents to us, the house has been “swept and put in order.” What would this mean? It might mean that the person has cleaned up his/her act. The person may have detoxed and gone into rehab. The person may be on medication for the anxiety or depression. The person may have taken an anger management class and learned some techniques of constructive conflict resolution. It seems that the person is now in a pretty good state.

However, this does not deter the demon from returning. In fact, the demon “goes and brings seven other spirits even more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.”

I think the problem is that the house, even though it has been cleaned up, is still empty. This is what enables the demon to move back in. Not only nature, but human nature abhors a vacuum. Empty houses never remain empty. Dust gathers in the corners, rats gnaw at the floorboards, and a ghost slams the door. Devils laugh in glee at the sight of an empty house.

There is a vacuum, an existential vacuum in many people’s lives. What is missing is a meaningful philosophy of life. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, which was published in 1950 as *From Death Camp to Existentialism*, the psychologist and death-camp survivor Viktor Frankl claimed that the “existential vacuum is a wide spread phenomenon of the 20th century” and lamented the fact that 60% of his American students felt that they lived in a state of “inner emptiness--a void within themselves.”

This problem is not getting better; it is getting worse. In 1960, when college freshmen were asked what their personal goals were, 41% wanted to make a lot of money, and 83% wanted to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. The pattern was significantly different fifty years later when 83% of freshmen said their goal was to be very well off financially, while only 20% wanted to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. As larger numbers of people come to perceive material wealth as an end in itself and, consequently, as more individual members of society are unhappy, our society nears a state of emotional bankruptcy. With emotional bankruptcy come our most disturbing social problems--including drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, and crime.

What is missing in so many people’s lives? What is the cause of the existential vacuum that leaves us so vulnerable to demonic possession? I realize I am speaking as a

minister, but I believe it is a lack of faith. It is the absence of a deep and meaningful relationship with God. It is the absence of even the slightest consciousness of God. What we are talking about is what Viktor Frankl called a spiritual vacuum. And a spiritual vacuum cannot be filled with nothing.

This brings us to our mission of the month: Straight Ahead Ministries. I have David Crane to thank for enlightening me about this very important mission and Scott Larson, the president and one of the founders, for sharing his thoughts with us on this ministry several years ago in this sanctuary.

The mission of Straight Ahead Ministries is to empower Jesus Christ to transform the lives of juvenile offenders. Their goal is “the opening of every juvenile institution in America for ministry as a witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; to raise awareness of the broader issues surrounding juvenile delinquency and at-risk youth; and to act as a conduit between juvenile detention centers and local Christian churches desiring to disciple teens to maturity in Christ.” The transformation of these young people, like any spiritual transformation, takes place from the inside out.

In olden times these kids, these kids in the juvenile prison system, would be described as demon possessed. They are unable or unwilling to live within the rules, within the structure, within the cultural norms or mores of their society. This is partially because they do not feel like they are a valued and valuable part of the larger society, nor have they been given the tools to function at this level. They are often abusers of alcohol and other drugs. They are often addicted to violence. They have little or no sense of empathy for their victims, from whom they feel alienated or detached.

Because there is a vacuum inside of them, a vacuum that is often the result of a lack of solid, caring, supportive, and loving parenting *as well as any religious or church affiliation*, something else fills the vacuum. It may be gang membership. Because they live in a materialistic society, and because they have little impulse control, they both want and feel they deserve anything they see. Inside themselves, there is nothing to keep them from robbing a store, killing a member of another gang, or abusing someone sexually.

This brings us to the purpose of our prison system. There are three functions that are served by our various institutions of incarceration. First, we need to be safe from people who are unwilling or unable to live within the structure, the code of laws and

social norms of our society. Second, we want offenders to learn that actions have consequences; we want them to be punished for what they have done. Third, we want to rehabilitate them. We want to send them back into society better human beings than when they entered the prison system.

I am especially interested in the third of these objectives. If we don't rehabilitate offenders while they are in our custody, they will become repeat offenders when they are released. The only alternative to rehabilitation is to lock every offender away for life. In addition to being unconstitutional, this is simply impractical. *We already have the highest percentage of our citizens in the justice system of any country on earth.* And please don't tell me that there is no racial bias in our judicial system! We would have to build a tremendous number of prisons to house all offenders indefinitely. This strikes me as a particularly unenlightened stance to take in response to a serious social problem.

Something needs to happen to the offender when he/she is in our custody. Something inwardly transformative needs to happen. This is particularly true of juvenile offenders, who are usually more amenable to rehabilitation than are hardened criminals. We need to teach these kids how to read and write. We need to help them get a high school and even a college education. We need to give them job skills. We need to teach them how to communicate, how to resolve interpersonal conflict in a constructive manner. We need to give them counseling to help them resolve some of the painful issues and experiences, the traumas of their past. We need to help them learn empathy and compassion. We need to give them hope for the future. And we need to help them find or construct a meaningful philosophy of life, a deep and meaningful religious faith.

I don't know how you would rate our prison system on this score card. I wouldn't give us a passing grade. What we don't do for those who have placed themselves outside society comes back to haunt us. The answer is not to be tougher on them, to punish them more severely. It is to give them the tools to become responsible human beings.

However, even though we protect ourselves and punish the offender, we are not rehabilitating him/her; we are not filling the vacuum. We can't just try to eliminate or marginalize the bad, to drive out the demons that have possessed the juvenile or adult offender; *we need to put something in its place.* If we leave the house a little cleaner and

more orderly but still empty, the demon will move back in. In fact, even more demons will move in and the state of the person will be even worse than it was before.

The two religious faiths that seem to me to be making the strongest impact on juvenile and adult offenders are Christianity and Islam. These people need something strong and solid and healthy to fill the vacuum. Islam is a simple, highly structured, and deeply moral religion. It is just what some people need. Christianity offers us the same, but it offers it to us through a relationship with God through Christ. Through awakening the power of the Holy Spirit within the person, the person discovers that he/she is a “temple of God,” as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:16. Once you have a sense of this, your life will not be the same. Once you realize that *every other human being is a child of God*, and hence is your brother or sister, your relationships will never be the same.

I believe that, with its prison visitation and Bible study, with its residential centers that provide both a high school and a Christian education, with its extremely effective interventions with gang members in cities throughout the country and even the world, Straight Ahead Ministries offers something that no one else is offering. Other programs might help to clean up the young person’s act. They might sweep out his/her house and set it in order. But without something healthy in the center, something like a strong and healthy religious faith, something like a relationship with God through Christ, we are leaving a vacuum. As soon as these kids are released, the demons move back in.

Jesus gives us a model for the treatment of both juvenile and adult offenders. He also tells us something about ourselves and about our society. Too many people have a vacuum in the center of their life. Even if this vacuum is filled by pleasure or material possessions, it is still an existential vacuum. If we look carefully and if we are honest, we can see some of its symptoms in our lives and in our relationships.

We can’t fill a vacuum with nothing. We need something strong enough to do battle with the demons that threaten to possess us both as individuals and as a society, to heal and transform what Jesus calls this “evil generation.” We need to fill the center with Jesus. When Jesus comes to live with us, the demons will keep their distance!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
www.firstcommunitychurch.com  
October 14, 2018*