

EXORCISING UNCLEAN SPIRITS

(08/29/2021)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:14-28

“But Jesus rebuked him [the unclean spirit], saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.” (Mk 1:25-26)

Welcome back! I’m glad everyone survived the “hurricane” and that our church is still standing!

When the storm didn’t turn out to be as intense as predicted, I was sorry we cancelled our worship service, though, based on the information we had, it was the correct decision. However, it forced me to postpone sharing something that I wanted to bring up last Sunday. Fortunately, a week’s delay has not substantially changed the matter I would like to address.

Over the past week and a half, I have struggled with a difficult decision. There is a situation that I would like to bring to your attention, but I don’t know a sensitive way to do it. I am not sure that I can raise the topic without hurting some people’s feelings.

As most of you know, though I have lived almost my entire life in Massachusetts, I have been a life-long New York Yankees fan. Wait a minute—some of you are already groaning and/or rolling your eyes as if you know what I am going to say before I say it! From the perspective of a Yankees fan who lives in Red Sox nation, the past two weeks have been very interesting! I was, dare I say, *blessed* with the opportunity to watch all three Red Sox—Yankees games, hence the broom resting aside the pulpit this morning, a subtle reminder of how the series went. *[Stage direction: at this point the preacher will hold up the broom for all to see.]*

Over the past week and a half, I have been trying to find a way to call attention to the changes that have taken place in the American League East, specifically how the 10-game lead that the Red Sox held over the Yankees a month ago has disappeared, without being accused of what the Germans call *Schadenfreude*, deriving pleasure from someone else’s pain. I have also been trying to find a way to weave the Yankees’ rapid ascent and the Red Sox’ humbling decent *[Stage direction: at this point the preacher will slowly raise his right hand to his throat, subtly simulating the experience of choking]* into a sermon illustration, without it seeming like a force-fit. No small challenge!

To be honest, I haven’t found a sensitive way to do this. So, since discretion is supposedly the better part of valor, I have decided not to try. As our dear friend and passionate Red Sox fan Lee Cummings would have told me, that would be “the Christian thing to do.” So just forget that I ever brought this up.

Two weeks ago, we began our study of the Gospel of Mark. We noted that this was the first of the gospels to be compiled, and that it was written around 70 CE, approximately 40 years after Jesus' death. We can be fairly certain about this date, since in Mark 13:2, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which took place in 70 CE. His prediction, however, raises the question of whether Jesus was prescient, whether he could see into the future, or whether this passage was written in by Mark.

The source for this gospel, which was originally written in Greek, is believed to be Peter's sermons and other oral and written traditions that John Mark, Peter's companion, pulled together. Because Mark goes out of his way to explain Jewish customs and to translate and explain Aramaic expressions, it leads us to believe that the original readers were Gentiles, i.e., non-Jews.

The author is not identified within the context of the gospel. By failing to include any self-identification, Mark is telling us that such information is unnecessary, that we don't need to know who compiled this gospel to understand it. This makes it different from the apostle Paul's letters, which drew their authority from the person who wrote them.

Because much of the information in the gospels was originally preserved and transmitted orally, we should be cautious in assuming that things happened exactly the way they are described and that the original conversations were word-for-word as recorded. This helps us understand how different gospels can describe the same event or interaction in different ways. However, just because we don't have audio-visual recordings of Jesus' teachings, healings, miracles, and conversations, this does not mean that his life and the true spirit of his teachings do not shine through to us!

As we noted, the gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with Mary. Mark begins his gospel with John the Baptist's preaching, with his call to "prepare the way of the Lord." John, by the way, is also preaching to us. We "prepare the way of the Lord" when we open our hearts and minds to receive God's healing presence and to hear God's challenging message. John calls us to repent, to address those parts of our life that are weak and in need of strengthening, those parts that are crooked and in need of straightening, those parts that are broken or wounded and in need of healing. When we do this, we "prepare the way of the Lord."

Mark begins his gospel not with Jesus' birth, but with his baptism. This was a transformative experience for Jesus. As Jesus was emerging from the waters of the River Jordan,

He [Jesus] saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This is what we would call a mystical experience, a mountaintop experience. However, immediately after receiving this blessing, Jesus is driven into the wilderness. This is a reminder of the ups and downs of life. Those moments when we feel the truth of Jesus' teaching, when we accept his call to become a disciple, are often followed by a descent into the valley. It might be a bit of a force-fit, but I am tempted to use a baseball analogy for the "ups and downs of life," . . . oh, never mind! Let's stick with a reminder that life can test us, that despite what we know to be true, doubts, and confusion can sneak in.

As we heard this morning, when Jesus emerged from the wilderness, he entered Galilee—preaching. He probably preached to a few interested listeners, sort of like our worship service, which stands in sharp contrast to the widespread dissemination of various messages on mass media, on social media. This was the medium that Jesus chose for his message. The great preacher and theologian George A. Buttrick has said,

Jesus could have written books. Instead, Jesus "came preaching." He entrusted his most precious sayings to the blemished reputation and precarious memory of his friends.

So, what was Jesus' message? "The kingdom of God is at hand." The kingdom of God is here, now, in your midst! Jesus was telling us that God's sovereignty over us and over our world is future, but it is also present! This message, amplified in the Beatitudes, describes what happens when our life is brought into harmony with God's will. When this happens, we feel blessed! A new order, a new world comes into being—and we are invited to be an integral part of it! BTW, this experience also brings healing, as we can see in Jesus' interaction with the man who was possessed by an unclean spirit.

Before we get to the healing, we should note that immediately after emerging from the wilderness, Jesus begins to call together a band of disciples. I don't know whether Jesus was an introvert or an extravert, but the first thing he does is create community. The little band of followers, this nascent community, was the seed that eventually sprouted and found form in the church. It is why we are members of this church family, this community of seekers.

Mark uses an interesting word to describe how Jesus selected his disciples. Mark says,

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

The interesting word is "saw." Jesus *saw* Simon and Andrew. Jesus didn't casually glance in Simon and Andrew's direction. Jesus saw deeper. He saw more. He saw potential, just as he does with us, for he calls us just as he did Simon, Andrew, James, John, and the others.

Since Jesus is a presence within us, it is not unreasonable for us to pray that we might take on his heart and mind. Mark suggests that we might begin this quest by taking on his eyes. We might try to see people as he did, as he does. We might also try to see ourselves as he does. If we can do this, we can experience healing and wholeness within ourselves, and we can help to create a better, a more compassionate world.

Immediately following his encounter with Peter, Andrew, James, and John, Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit. This, the first of his healing miracles, is also recorded in the Gospel of Luke; Matthew, for some reason, chose to leave it out. I wonder why. The healing takes place at the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus has astounded the elders with the depth of his teaching: “he taught as one having authority, not as one of the scribes.” We know the source of Jesus’ authority. It didn’t come from book learning; it came from his baptism and his transformative experience in the wilderness.

The man, who is apparently already in the synagogue, cries out to Jesus for help. He is apparently possessed by not one unclean spirit, but many. The unclean spirits speak in and through the man; they address Jesus using the pronouns “we” and “us.” Whatever it means to be possessed by an unclean spirit, we need to realize that there is probably never just one; there are always variations or iterations, just as with the coronavirus that afflicts us.

The healing appears to be psychological-spiritual rather than physical-medical in that the unclean spirit is exorcised. It is driven out by the presence and the authority of Jesus. Whatever language we use to describe or categorize the unclean spirit, unclean spirits function to separate us from God, from our brothers and sisters, and from the deepest parts of ourselves. In ancient times, this was described as demon possession.

Have you ever had the feeling that something unhealthy has taken possession of you, something that is more powerful than your will? You would like to banish this unclean spirit, which is destroying you and those you love, but you can’t. Anger fits into this category, as does resentment. Addictions usually can’t be driven out by willpower; the addict needs to access his/her Higher Power through the support of a healing community and through engaging in the spiritual discipline of recovery. Certain destructive patterns of behavior can take over a person’s life and ruin it. Deeply ingrained complexes, like an inferiority complex or a narcissistic wound with its accompanying narcissistic defenses, can also wreak havoc in a person’s life.

I believe that Jesus healed people. I believe that he healed this man. I picture Jesus, who was an incarnation of the Holy Spirit, awakening and strengthening the healing power of the Holy Spirit within this man. This healing miracle teaches us that the healing, strengthening, centering power of the Holy Spirit within us is more powerful than those forces that would pull

our life off center. If we nurture or strengthen this inner presence through prayer, meditation, worship, and the way we live our lives, we, too, can exorcise those demons that possess us.

One last point. The demon asks Jesus, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” That’s an interesting question. What does Jesus have to do with unclean spirits, with the demons that possess us and our world? What does Jesus have to do with our greed, with our prejudices, with our egocentrism, our narcissism, with our hurtful and self-destructive behavior?

The answer, of course, is simple. The answer is *everything*! Jesus has *everything* to do with our personal and social demons! He has to do with sex trafficking, with slave labor, with the drug trade, with entrenched power, with personal and systemic racism, with homophobia and transphobia, with oppressive government, with dominant militarism, with unrestricted individualism, with the forces that give rise to soul-crushing poverty, and with the willful or neglectful destruction of our environment, of this beautiful world that God has created.

Jesus has to do with *every single thing* that affects us, that affects our quality of life! Nothing human is foreign to him! In response to the demons’ suggestion that Jesus mind his own business, Jesus responds, “People *are* my business.”

And people are our business as well. *All* people!

In the week to come, let’s try to drive out some demons—beginning with our own.

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