

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

(10/10/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 12:22-23, 43-45

*“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 empty, 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.” (Mt. 12:43-45)*

I confess that 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, and their caretakers, it might also teach us something about our own spiritual journey.

The passage, as it appears, is almost identical in Matthew and Luke. It does not appear in Mark or John. As we know, 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 account of the Annunciation. This is not surprising since each of these evangelists wrote out of the oral tradition and the documents available within his own church tradition. However, there are several 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 worked independently? The answer? They could do this because they had a copy of another gospel in front of them. They each drew from this gospel, a “lost” gospel that biblical scholars call “Q”. If you want to do something special with your life, and make a lot of money in the process, just 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 of scripture we heard this morning describes an exorcism. Jesus has driven a demon out of a man who was blind and mute. We assume that the demon caused the man to be blind and mute. Jesus tells his followers that when a demon has been driven out of a person, it “wanders.” The man from whom Jesus exorcized the

demon appears to have served as the demon's host; he provided the demon with a place of residence. In fact, the demon refers to the man as "my house." This indicates a high degree of ownership by the demon. The demon appears to have possessed the man or taken over his life, with serious and debilitating consequences.

How can we in the twenty-first century understand this biblical reference to demons? The "demon" may be a symbolic way of denoting some form of mental illness that has the person in its grasp. It may be an addiction of some sort. Its effect on its host could be descriptive of what the psychologist C. G. 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 personality disorder, e.g., a narcissistic personality disorder with its accompanying attitude of self-centeredness. It may refer to a problem with anger management or an obsessive need for control. These all affect our relationships. They limit our ability to hear and speak properly.

The scripture passage implies that the demonic spirit not only has a power; it has what philosophers would call an ontological status: it is an independent reality. When we are possessed by an unclean spirit, our life and relationships are under the control of that spirit. We are off-center and, consequently, we are not living the beautiful, creative, loving, joy-filled life that God wills for us.

Jesus, through his power to draw people back to their real center in God, drives the demon from the man and restores the man to health. The demon is now "wandering." When the exorcised demon cannot find a suitable habitation, it returns to its original home. 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 temporarily driven out, the unclean spirit that can take control of us and ruin the quality of our life returns again and again.

In the metaphor that Jesus presents to us, the "house" has been "swept and put in order." What would this mean? It might mean that we have cleaned up our act. If we are an alcoholic, we may have detoxed and gone into rehab. If we are suffering from anxiety or depression, instead of understanding what the psyche is saying to us through these symptoms, we may go on medication and feel better. If our problem is anger, we may have taken an anger management class and learned some techniques of constructive conflict resolution.

However, this does not prevent 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 to which Jesus draws our attention is that the house, even though it has been cleaned up, is still empty. This is what enables the demon to move back in. In fact, it may be why or how the demon originally moved in. Science tells us that nature abhors a vacuum, but *human nature also abhors a vacuum*. Empty houses never remain empty. Dust gathers in the corners, rats gnaw at the floorboards, and a ghost wanders the halls. 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 the book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which was originally published under the title, *From Death Camp to Existentialism*, the psychologist and death-camp survivor Viktor Frankl claimed that the "existential vacuum is a widespread 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 top three 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 sixty 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 individuals are deeply unhappy, our society approaches a state of existential bankruptcy. With existential bankruptcy comes 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, which includes membership in a religious or political cult? I believe it is *the absence of a deep and meaningful relationship with God*. It is the absence of even the slightest consciousness of God. It 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 introducing me to Scott Larson, the president and one of the founders. Scott shared his thoughts with us on this ministry on a Sunday morning several years ago.

The mission of Straight Ahead Ministries is to empower Jesus Christ to *transform* the lives of juvenile offenders. I think the word "transform" in their mission statement is

important. Their stated 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.” I like the phrase “maturity in Christ;” it speaks of a mature religious faith. The transformation of these young people, like any spiritual transformation, has to take place *from the inside out*.

In biblical times, these kids in the juvenile prison system would have been described as demon possessed. They are obviously unable or unwilling to live within the rules, within the structure, within the cultural norms or mores of their society. Nowadays we know that this may be because they do not feel that they are a valued and valuable part of the larger society, and they have not been given the tools to function in this society. They often abuse alcohol and other drugs. They are often addicted to violence; they see violence as an acceptable means to an end. They have little or no feeling 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 the absence of any religious or church affiliation*, something else fills the vacuum. *Something will always fill the vacuum!* It may be gang membership, which gives the child a tribal identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of power. Because they have little financial security or personal wealth, though they live in a materialistic society, and because they have little impulse control or the ability to set long-term realistic goals for their life, they both want and feel they deserve anything they see. Inside themselves, they lack a moral core or a moral code that would keep them from robbing a store, killing a member of another gang, or abusing someone sexually.

This brings us to the three functions that are served by the juvenile and adult prison system. First, we all need to be protected from people who are unwilling or unable to live within the code of laws and social norms of our society. Second, we want juvenile and adult 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.

All three of these objectives are important, but I am especially interested in the third one. 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 his/her 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.

Obviously, something constructive 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 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, though it is all-the-rage to declare that we are "tough on crime." We need to give these young people the tools they need to become responsible human beings.

When we settle for simply protecting ourselves and punishing the offender, we are not rehabilitating him/her, and we are certainly 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. One can pick up some particularly bad habits in prison—or in gangs!

The two religious faiths that seem to me to be making the strongest impact on juvenile and adult offenders are Christianity and Islam. The third, in my opinion, is Buddhism. Juvenile and adult offenders 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 them a relationship with God through Christ. Through awakening the power of the Holy Spirit, the person discovers that he/she is a "temple of God," as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:16. Once we have a sense of this, our life will not be the same! Once we realize that *every other human being is a child of God*, and hence is our brother or sister, our relationships will never be the same! Buddhism not only strengthens this sense of interrelatedness; it helps the offender

discover that there is something beautiful beyond description at his/her core—his/her Buddha nature, *which is at everyone else's core as well!*

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 our country and around 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, especially if they go right back to the same neighborhood, the demons will 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 or power, 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. We need to fill the center with love.

When we experience Jesus' presence within and among us, and when we experience and then share the healing power of love, the demons will keep their distance!

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October 10, 2021*