

## FILLING A SPIRITUAL VACUUM

(06/11/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 11:14-26

*“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 been a difficult teaching for me to understand. This morning I would like to explore it from the perspective of how our church’s mission offerings address a moral and spiritual vacuum that haunts our world and our lives.

As you probably know, our church supports a different mission each month. Some are local; some are regional or national; some are international. Some of the organizations we support are religious; some are secular, organizations that we believe are carrying out Jesus’ healing ministry in the world in their own way. This morning, I would like to hold up two of our mission recipients: Straight Ahead Ministries, and His Royal Ministry.

Our own Mattie Cummings was one of the founders and presently serves as the Director of His Royal Ministry. His Royal Ministry founded and continues to support a church and a school in one of the poorer sections of Haiti (if that description is the least bit meaningful). Several years ago, Pastor Laurenson, on his first visit to the United States, worshipped with us. Needless to say, they are grateful for our support!

Speaking of “needless to say,” I think we all know that Haiti is what our young people would call a “hot mess.” It is the poorest country in the western hemisphere. It has a legacy of dictatorships, abuses of power, corruption, and social instability. Seldom does a year pass when it is not devastated by a major hurricane. Following a major earthquake several years ago, an epidemic of cholera killed tens of thousands of Haitians who did not have access to clean water and sanitation.

Over the past few years, in addition to a second major earthquake and the devastating effect of the coronavirus pandemic, their democratically elected president was assassinated. Chaos reigns in the cities, with gangs staking out their territories, engaging in rapes, kidnapping for ransom, and executions to terrorize the population. The police, who are underpaid and outgunned, are incapable of reasserting control. The judicial as well as the political system has broken down. And the response from Haiti’s

neighbors, those of us in North America, South America, and Central America who are most able to help, has been underwhelming.

In a recent letter, Mattie assures us that “as we pray for them, the people of Pastor Laurensen’s little church are gathering to pray for us.” Yes--that is a little humbling.

The people of Haiti are suffering. And we do what we can to help (though we could, of course, do more). But that is not the point I wish to make this morning. A troubling movement is emerging in Haiti in response to the rampant crime and gang violence, a movement that I fear is emerging in our country as well. As reported in the New York times this past week,

*The 14 presumed gang members under arrest were arriving at a police station in Haiti’s capital when a group of people overpowered the police, rounded up the suspects outside, and used gasoline to burn them alive.*

*The gruesome executions April 24 marked the start of a brutal vigilante campaign to reclaim the streets of the capital, Port-au-Prince, from gangs that have inflicted terror on Haitians for nearly two years.*

*In a nation wracked by extreme poverty and violence, civilians have taken up arms and killed at least 160 people believed to be gang members in the six weeks since a citizens’ “self-defense” movement kicked off its vigilantism with the brazen attack.*

I can totally understand how the people of Haiti feel about the gangs that have taken over their country. Actually, I can’t—because nothing in my life experience comes anywhere near what they are experiencing. They live in fear. They want to take back their streets, their cities, their country. They want to keep their families safe. Since the police cannot protect them, they have to protect themselves. Since the courts are unable to administer legal justice, they will administer vigilante justice. So, they took those purported gang members away from the police and burned them all alive.

I am not a big fan of vigilante justice, even when the judicial system has broken down, as it has in Haiti. My problem is that some of the gang members who were summarily executed were probably teenagers who got caught up in a gang. In certain neighborhoods, you either join a gang or you die. We use the word “choose” rather loosely when we say that all these young people “chose” to be in a gang.

What we need to do, and this is the goal of the second mission I mentioned, Straight Ahead Ministries, is help these young people extricate themselves from these

gangs to build a better life for themselves. We need a more creative response to what invariably happens when you have a vacuum—either in a society or within ourselves.

The scripture passage we heard this morning describes an exorcism. Jesus has just driven a demon out of a man. The person who was possessed has involuntarily served as the demon's "house." In the parable, the demon actually 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.

In modern terms, the demon that possesses us may be an addiction. It could be descriptive of what Jung called a complex, e.g., an inferiority complex that can possess us and shape our life in a dramatic way. It may describe the selfishness and self-centeredness of a narcissistic personality disorder. It may refer to an anger that spins out of control. When we are under the influence of a demon, we are living off-center; we are far from the kingdom of God.

The scripture passage implies that the realm of the demonic not only has power; it has an ontological status. When we are possessed by a demon, our life and our 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 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, the demon returns again and again. I don't know if you have ever had his experience, but for those who have, you know that our demons return and struggle for power over us despite our sincere, heart-felt resolutions.

In his parable, Jesus tells us that the "house" has been "swept and put in order." What would this mean? It might mean that the person has detoxed. 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 appears that the person is now doing better.

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. We know that nature abhors a

vacuum; human nature also abhors a vacuum. Empty houses, whether they are outer dwelling places or our inner psyche, our identity, 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.

What is happening in Haiti is a frightening response to a social & political vacuum. When there is a social or political vacuum, when democracy and the rule of law are dissolved, dictators take over, the military takes over, gangs take over, or vigilantes take over. However, there is also a vacuum, an existential vacuum in many people's lives. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, the psychologist and death-camp survivor Viktor Frankl claimed that the "existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon of the 20th century." He lamented the fact that 60% of his American students felt that they lived in what he described as a "state of inner emptiness--a void within themselves."

This problem is getting worse. In 1960, the year I started college, when college freshmen were asked what their personal goals were, 20% wanted to make a lot of money, and 80% wanted to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. The pattern was reversed fifty years later when 80% 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 larger numbers of people are unhappy, our society becomes emotionally bankrupt. This gives rise to a range of social problems, including drug 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? Not surprisingly, I believe it is the absence of a deep and meaningful relationship with God, of God's presence in life and in our life. It is the absence of even the slightest consciousness of God. It is the absence of an enlightened conscience, a healthy and enlightened moral guide. The persons who commit hate crimes, like the woman in Florida who recently shot and killed her Black neighbor who had simply come to her front door, have obviously not taken on the heart and the mind of Jesus. They do not see all people, *all people*, as children of God.

This brings us to the second mission that I mentioned: Straight Ahead Ministries. I have David Crane to thank for enlightening me about this important mission and Scott Larson, the president and founder, 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.” I like that expression: “disciplining someone to maturity in Christ,” because it applies to all of us. The transformation of these young people, and of us as well, like any spiritual transformation, must take place from the inside out.

Many of the kids who are gang members in Haiti or here in America could be described as possessed. There is a vacuum inside them, a vacuum that is often the result of a lack of solid, caring, supportive, and loving parenting *as well as a dearth of any religious or church affiliation*. 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 believe they are a valued and valuable part of the larger society, nor have they been given the tools to function at this level. They turn to alcohol and drugs to numb their inner pain. The gang becomes their center, their identity. Feeling powerless, they become addicted to violence and to the sense of power that an assault weapon gives them. They have little or no sense of empathy for their victims, from whom they feel alienated or detached.

The young people who are caught up in gang warfare in Haiti need to be held accountable for their actions. In our country, they would be put in prison. However, if we don't rehabilitate offenders while they are in our custody, they will become repeat offenders when 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*. 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 young people, and also the adults who are in our custody. We need to teach them how to read and write. We need to help them get a high school and 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*. Basically, we need to help them experience fullness of life as a child of God.

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 this country and also the world, Straight Ahead Ministries offers something important. 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.

Both Straight Ahead Ministries and the little church we are supporting in Haiti, a community of faith that teaches love and practices forgiveness, a community of faith that stands as a beacon of hope, a glimmer of light in the surrounding darkness, are helping to fill a spiritual vacuum. Our little church is attempting to do this as well.

Jesus' parable 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."

In this church we believe that we can not only experience healing; we can not only be exorcised of our demons; our center can be filled in a beautiful and meaningful way with Jesus!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
June 11, 2023*

An audio copy of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.