

“Stilling the Unclean Spirit” Mark 1: 21-28; Psalm 111 1-29-2012

This morning’s scripture reading, from the gospel of Mark, shows Jesus revealing his inner strength and authority over spirits that were evil and that dwelt within humans. This is one of many healing miracles our gospels tell us about.

It had to be a powerful moment for those who witnessed this event and for many who have read about it. Usually, especially in the gospel of Mark, Jesus would tell those who had been healed that they were to tell no one. In this case, that did not happen and his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding area. People began to recognize that this was no ordinary teacher but one who had some authority from God.

Jesus often told people to keep their healings quiet because, he knew that if they did not he would soon be surrounded by those who wanted to be cured of one physical ailment or another. While that was an important part of his ministry, he had come to help mend people spiritually and to help them find a pathway to God. He wanted them to have the same sense of God’s closeness as he had. A mere physical healing did not always bring this about.

In the world of Jesus there were many different illnesses that people believed were caused by an evil spirit dwelling within someone’s soul. Epilepsy was one such ailment and mental health issues were another. The Gadarene demoniac, another possessed soul Jesus encountered, was most likely the victim of mental illness. If you remember this story you will recall that the demons called themselves “Legion.” When driven out by Jesus they fled into a herd of pigs that dashed over a cliff and was destroyed. In both of our stories, the demons recognized the power and authority Jesus had.

In our world we have the ability to diagnose more precisely just what it is that ails people. We feel that we have come a long way in this regard. But there are sicknesses of the soul, from which many suffer, that medical science does not seem to have the ability to heal. These illnesses require that we do some self examination and see what it is that is the underlying cause of our misery. When we learn what it is that causes us to act and react to life the way we do, and if we do not like what we see and decide to change, we are on the road to finding a way to heal our selves.

If we know we are judgmental of others, or that we have no patience at all with some, or that we simply cannot let go of slights that might have happened in the past, or always think that we are number one, or find ourselves unable to commit to loving anyone outside of our selves, we need to devise a plan to become better persons—the best humans we can become in a weak imitation of Christ. Very often we discover that we are very unhappy persons at our cores and we react in ways that are not at all fitting for those who call themselves the followers of Christ. We find that we do harbor some unclean spirits and that we need to begin the process of stilling them, silencing them and even driving them out. When we are able to get rid of envy, anger, hurt, pride and greed, we discover the essence of who we are and what we can become.

This is a difficult process and it requires focused work, a little like the laser beam Jesus turned upon the man in our story. It requires that we treat ourselves kindly as we acknowledge our foibles and that we remove the unclean spirits we have carried around with us for such a long time that they have become our best friends. As they say “Breaking up is hard to do.” But, we must do it, if we are to lead fuller, happier lives. We need to find the goodness that is there, deep inside and that ties us to our God.

I know that when I find myself in the turmoil of life and I am able to step aside a bit and consider what is going on, I am much better off if I remember that I am to reflect the way Jesus was, as I live and move and have my being. I am to show the love of God to others and cast out anything and everything that prevents me from doing so. When I am able to practice what I preach, and I don't always manage to do so, I find a great peace and I see more clearly the value every human has in the eyes of God. I know I need to cast out an unclean spirit or two and begin again.

That is the blessing of our faith. We can always begin again in a new direction. We see, in our story, Jesus helping a man find the way to fullness of life. We see him cast out a spirit that was only injuring him, creating space for good. We see him doing this with authority that comes from God. And we know, in our hearts, that the same healing is present for us.

There is a hymn in our hymnal based on this scripture reading. I toyed with having us sing it, but it is difficult—the tune is strange and somewhat discordant—kind of like an unclean spirit. But, discordant as it might be, there is a great deal of meaning in it. These are the words:

“Silence, frenzied, unclean spirit!” Cried God's healing Holy One,

“Cease your ranting! Flesh can’t bear it; Flee as night before the sun.”
At Christ’s words the demon trembled, From its victim madly rushed,
While the crowd that was assembled Stood in wonder stunned and hushed.

Lord, the demons still are thriving In the gray cells of the mind;
Tyrant voices, shrill and driving, Twisted thoughts that grip and bind,
Doubts that stir the heart to panic, Fears distorting reason’s sight,
Guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with fright.

Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit In our mind and in our heart;
Speak your word that when we hear it, All our demons shall depart,
Clear our thought and calm our feeling, Still the fractured, warring soul
By the power of your healing Make us faithful, true and whole.

(“Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit”, Thomas H. Troeger, Carol Doran:
Hymns for a Pilgrim People , 159, GIA, 2007)

Amen