

## Today's Demons

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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An author in South Dakota by the name of Kathleen Norris writes, "When I think of the demons I need to exorcise, I have to look inward, to my heart and soul. Anger is my best demon, useful whenever I have to go into a Woman Warrior mode, harmful when I use it to gratify myself, either in self-justification, or to deny my fears. My husband, who has a much sweeter nature than I, once told me that my mean streak grieved him, not just because of the pain it cause him **but because it was doing me harm**. His remark, as wise as any counselor, felt like an exorcism. Not that my temptation to anger was magically gone, but I was called to pay closer attention to something that badly needed my attention, and that was hurting our marriage.

A question worth asking ourselves is: "What are the demons you harbor?" Being honest with yourself and naming them for what they are, and how they bring suffering, is half the battle. It takes humility to look into our souls and see the problem areas of our lives.

At some level we all project various personas of how we want others to see us and how we want to see ourselves. It seems that these masks most often arise from voices that live within us. They are the voices of condemnation and guilt, unresolved childhood trauma, fear, anger, and judgment. These voices keep us in constant comparison and competition with others. We are never able to do or be enough. These voices are lies we tend to speak to ourselves.

That's one reason Jesus came was to give us a new identity. He came to silence our false voices. He calls us into our true self, the one made in the image and likeness of God. He calls us back into beauty and wholeness. The exorcism in today's gospel is as much about calling forth the good that is within us as it is about casting out the evil. They are two sides of the same coin.

The philosopher G.K. Chesterton said: "The human race according to religion fell once, and in falling gained the knowledge of good and evil. Now we have fallen a second time, and only the knowledge of evil remains."

Chesterton's words are true, particularly if we find ourselves attracted voices in our society that tell us to hate, be suspicious of others, and move toward separation rather than unity. The reason people find these negative societal voices so attractive is because they are the familiar voices in their souls that they have been listening to for years. We find ourselves attracted to others who hate and embrace racism because that is the sad state of our souls.

Chesterton also said: "Modern intelligence won't accept anything on authority. But it will accept anything without authority."

The evil spirits within us and our society need to encounter the authority of Jesus Christ and be exorcised in his name. And just like at the time of Jesus, these demons will scream in anger and convulse the possessed body as they encounter the holiness and authority of Jesus Christ and are cast out.

The man in today's gospel with an unclean spirit cried out in a loud voice and said to Jesus: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." He spoke from that deep place of knowing. His recognition of Jesus is his recognition of himself and his own holiness if he would let go of evil. To the possessed man, Jesus in effect said: "Shhh. Be quiet. That's not who you are. You are mine and I love you unconditionally."

Love is the energy of God and the energy of hate and evil are repulsed by it.

If we listen to the positive voices of love and compassion; that's what we will offer to others: Loving voices, that build up and include; rather than the voices of the evil spirits in our souls and society that call us to separate, be suspicious of others, and drive wedges between people.

As we study the life of Jesus, we find that he did the opposite. His voice is what Abraham Lincoln called in the Gettysburg address: "The better angels of our nature." Each generation and each individual has to choose what voices to listen to: The evil spirit of division and hate or the Holy Spirit of love, compassion and unity.

Trying to follow the positive voice of Christ in our hearts is a little like the story of a missionary lost in the jungle. He had lost all sense of direction and was wondering around filled with fear until he finally stumbled upon a small village where he asked one of the natives to please lead him out of the jungle. One man said he could. "Great!" the missionary said, "Show me the way!" They walked for hours through dense brush hacking their way through unmarked jungle. The missionary began to worry and said, "Are you sure this is the way? Where is the path?" The native said. "In this jungle there is no path. I am the path."

So it is with us. Jesus and his teachings are the path out of the jungle. The challenge is to discern his voice Jesus in our society, when other voices of hate and division attempt to drown his out. To discern the voice of Christ in our daily lives is our task.

In 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians we are given a criteria to discern which voices are from the Holy Spirit and which ones are from the Flesh. Saint Paul writes these words in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter:

"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever<sup>18</sup> you want.

<sup>19</sup>The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; <sup>20</sup>idolatry, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions <sup>21</sup>and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

We discern the Holy Spirit by the fruit we see manifested in the lives of people around us:

Saint Paul goes on to say: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup>Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup>Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

We don't need an exorcist to cast out our evil spirits. Jesus Christ casts the evil out as we take serious his teachings and strive to imitate him. As we do so, we listen to, what Abraham Lincoln called: “The better angels of our nature”.

Amen.