

“He Commands Even the Unclean Spirits”

Mark 1:21-28

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I didn't really want to talk about unclean spirits today. When I looked at the appointed readings for today, I saw this passage in Mark's gospel, and I thought to myself, "Let's not preach on that this time." I considered the Deuteronomy passage, about the "prophet like Moses" that God would raise up, and about false prophets who speak lies in the name of God ... I considered the reading from the Psalms, about the greatness of all the works of the Lord ... I gave serious thought to the passage in 1 Corinthians about food sacrificed to idols; I could have outlined how the sacrificial system worked in the ancient world, what Paul was saying, and the relevance that has for us today ... but all along the way, there was this nagging voice in my head, saying, *Demons*. You need to talk about *demons* and *unclean spirits*.

And if that wasn't enough to convince me, well, there was this text message I got from Deb, our choir director, Monday morning, telling me she wanted the choir to sing that song you just heard a few minutes ago, "Silence! Frenzied, Unclean Spirit." Deb wrote, "I have done this before and is fun to layer and feel the demons being silenced. Can't wait." It's certainly not a typical hymn, full of dissonance and strife, that gives way to beauty and light – not a song that I would want to hear over and over again, or get stuck in my brain for any length of time, but it certainly does give a very powerful *feel*, two very different types of music, representing and symbolizing the two very different types of entities that found themselves confronting each other, in that story from Mark's gospel – one dark and demonic, the other bright and divine; one representing the power of Satan, the other representing the power of Jesus.

So I guess I'm talking about demons and unclean spirits today!

The story takes place in Capernaum, a village along the shores the Sea of Galilee. This story follows right on the heels of the calling of the first disciples, the story we heard last week. This is *early* in Jesus' ministry; *very* early. Jesus goes to the synagogue; he's teaching people God's Word; he's teaching in a *remarkable* way, with a kind of *authority* that people in that synagogue are not accustomed to hearing. Then, right in the midst of his message, there's an interruption, a commotion, a disturbance: a man who cries out with a loud shout. Not a shout of affirmation or praise; this isn't someone shouting "Amen!" This is a voice of *challenge*, of *rebuke*, of *questioning*. "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."

Who is the "us" that this man is referring to? "What have you to do with *us*?" "Have you come to destroy *us*?" Is he talking about the people in Capernaum, in the synagogue? Does Jesus somehow present an existential threat to these ordinary men and women. No — the "us" doesn't refer to *them*. The "us" refers to something deeper. Something under the surface. Something more *sinister*.

Mark, the narrator, tells us what's going on. The man has an *unclean spirit*. That phrase

“unclean spirit” occurs 21 times in the New Testament. It has to do with *demon possession*. The idea is that *demons*, spiritual forces of darkness, sometimes gain control over the lives of individual men and women. They twist them, distort them, cause them to be someone *other* than the person God had created them to be. In the New Testament, we read stories about quite a number of men and women who had been possessed by demons, causing them to lose their ability to speak, or their ability to see, or their ability to hear; or to develop epilepsy, or fever, or other forms of sickness and disease; or – perhaps worst of all – various forms of mental illness. But it’s not just in the New Testament that we read about such things; there are evil spirits in the Old Testament too, like the one that inhabited the mind of the mad King Saul. Other ancient Jewish writings also refer to demon possession.

In our modern world, with our scientific and medical advances, you won’t find many doctors talking about demons and unclean spirits. We now understand a wide range of mental disorders: developmental disorders, communication disorders, disorders on the Autism spectrum (like Asperger’s), motor disorders (like Tourette syndrome), schizophrenia, delusional disorders, bipolar disorders, various forms of depression, phobias, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, trauma- and stress-related disorders, adjustment disorders, dissociative disorders, somatic disorders, eating disorders (like anorexia and bulimia), sleep disorders, sexual disorders, impulse and conduct disorders, substance and addictive disorders, neurocognitive disorders (like dementia), personality disorders, and more. The list of mental disorders you could potentially be diagnosed with is *very* long. Some are mild and do not affect one’s daily functioning all that much; others, of course, are very severe.

The ancient world, of course, did not have this elaborate classification system we have today. They simply knew that sometimes people were not in their right mind. They attributed it to demons. And who could blame them for that? For they knew that there were people who simply did not behave the way the majority of the population did; their persistent behavior seemed extreme, and sometimes dangerous. There were also people who *once* had behaved rationally but *no longer* did. We see this today; perhaps there’s someone you love dearly who has lost their ability to reason, or their memory, or other mental faculties. The natural explanation, in the ancient world, was that some sort of evil power had come over this person, causing them to no longer be in the same mind that they had once been in.

Today, in contrast, we tend to use more scientific terminology. Genetic factors can increase the risk for certain disorders. Environmental factors, like toxins and traumatic experiences, can also play a role. In many cases, there are issues in the brain, like neurotransmitters that have become impaired, or chemical imbalances. We use scientific terminology because we *understand* a whole lot more than was understood two thousand years ago, about how these bodies that God gave us *actually work*.

But, from a spiritual standpoint, we can still say that there’s something *behind* all this. There’s some metaphysical *reason* why our bodies aren’t *perfect*, why these *flaws* exist, why genetic factors and environmental factors and brain chemistry issues exist in the first place. One of the basic premises of the Bible and the Christian tradition is that God created the world *good*. Eden was *perfect!* But ... something went wrong. Sin and evil entered this world, both *contrary* to God’s design, and the human race has been flawed ever since. One of the ways those flaws manifest themselves is in the form of mental disorders. Please understand, I am not saying that people who are diagnosed with any form of mental illness have *chosen* that path, and I am certainly not saying that such people are being *punished* for some kind of *sin* in their past. That is not what I am saying, at all. What I am saying is that there is a force opposed to God that tries to wreak havoc on *all* of God’s creation. One of the ways it does that is

by assailing our minds, causing impairments or imbalances that *shouldn't be there*, according to God's original plan and design. This has been happening from practically the very beginning, and it continues to happen today. We just have a better scientific understanding of the *nuances* of what's happening inside our bodies and our brains now, than our ancestors did two thousand years ago. It's the same phenomenon, then and now; we can just *describe* it a whole lot better today than we could back then.

So this man in the synagogue who challenges Jesus: if he were alive today, he would surely be diagnosed with one of the many different mental disorders we now know to exist. There would be a treatment plan, and his insurance company would be involved, helping to pay for the treatment.

But Jesus is better than any treatment plan, less costly than any insurance company. Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter. This man is not well; a spiritual force of darkness has settled upon him, *into* him, and that spiritual force is the *root cause* of this man's problems. Whatever has gone wrong with the neurotransmitters in this man's brain, Jesus knows how to fix it: with a stern word of *command*. "Be silent," he says, directly addressing the spiritual force, "and come out of him!" And "the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him." Whatever was going awry in this man's brain, whatever chemical impairment or imbalance that the unclean spirit had been causing, *Jesus fixes it. Jesus repairs the damage.* The man's mind is restored to how *God* had designed it to be.

This is what Jesus can do. This is the power of God at work.

Jesus didn't mess around. He didn't try to negotiate with the unclean spirit. He didn't give it any ground. He *immediately* recognized it for what it was. It, in turn, immediately recognized *Jesus* for who and what *he* was. One spiritual power, versus another spiritual power, with a man's life and well-being hanging in the balance. Jesus, of course, wins. Jesus *always* wins.

Now you may be wondering: *how does this help the beloved person I know, who is struggling with a mental disorder?* Or, perhaps, even: *how does this help me, with the mental disorder that I have been diagnosed with?* I would say: trust the professionals. Follow your treatment plan. Do what the doctors are telling you to do. That can – and will – *definitely* make a difference. *But don't stop there.*

Do not neglect the power of *prayer*. There is something *spiritual* going on, so you also need to address it on a *spiritual* level. *Pray* for your healing, or your loved one's healing. Ask Jesus to send his legion of angels to protect and defend you, or the person you love. Invoke the aid of almighty *God*.

I would also urge you to go one step further. Talk directly to the unclean spirit. *Command* it to leave. I'm not kidding. You've been baptized, right? You've been given the Holy Spirit, right? One of the powers that the Holy Spirit grants to some Christians is the ability to bring about *spiritual healing*. Some Christians have the ability to *cast out demons*. We read about this in the gospels; the 70 disciples whom Jesus sent out to do ministry in his name were amazed to discover that they *even had power over the unclean spirits*. Some Christians throughout the centuries have had that power. *Maybe you do too.* Don't let our secular world lull you into thinking that this gift doesn't exist. *Command* that demon to leave. It might not happen immediately. It might not happen without repeated effort. It might require the prayers of *many* people. Many of these demons are *very* strong. Persistent. Determined *not to let go*. Don't give up. That unclean spirit *does not want* to let go. It's going to take a *lot* to get it to leave. You have access to the power of the Holy Spirit. *Use* that power! *Command* the demon: "*Be gone!*"

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