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4th Sunday of Epiphany

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Unclean Spirits”

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Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24and 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." 25But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27They 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." 28At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This is the word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Unclean Spirits

“When we are healthy, wealthy, and powerful, we forget about our mortality. It’s only when irreparable cracks set in that we come back to reality.” – Bangambiki Habyarimana, *Pearls of Eternity*

Jamaica is a tiny, formerly colonized island nation in the Caribbean. It is the birthplace of my parents and my grandparents, my aunts, uncles, and cousins.

There is a vast spectrum of wealth and poverty in the island, yet the striking thing about the people who live there is that whether they are richer or poorer, they are astoundingly tidy. A mountainside dwelling may be cobbled together from whatever the homeowner could find, with a reclaimed tin roof, and a dirt floor, but the dirt floor is swept spotless, and the children of the house are neatly dressed, their white cotton uniform shirts bleached and pressed. So it is interesting to watch my visiting Jamaican friends and relatives enter into a store like Target or Wal-Mart in the U.S. for the first time. The dozens of aisles of personal and household cleaning products, that one might think would be a tidy person’s dream, make no sense to them. The hundreds of varieties of disinfectant are mystifying.

“What do you use 46 different types of soap for?” they often wonder aloud. “Why do you need a special soap for your face, and one for your hands, and then a separate one for other parts of your body?”

Why does everything contain scrubbing beads, and micro-cleansers? What’s the matter with a scrub brush and bleach?”

Compared with the rest of the world, we Americans take personal hygiene and general disinfection to another level. From our appreciation of gleaming teeth and

deodorizers of all sorts, to our manicured lawns and store aisles full of bleach products, most of us cherish our unsoiled, unstained existence.

What makes us so eager to be clean?

We could easily have asked this question of our Jewish ancestors in today's text.

They too, had a thing about cleanliness, both bodily *and* spiritual.

We often struggle when we encounter exorcism in our modern study of the Bible.

It's difficult to hear these stories in our context and not automatically write them off as first Century misunderstanding of things we now know as mental illness or neurological disorders. But there is more to this exorcism than a skirmish between the Son of God and the legion of Satan. What is the writer really getting at with this story about possession by an unclean spirit? To make sense of this story, it helps to first look at the meaning behind words like 'possession' and 'unclean spirits'.

"Possession" - Possession in this story is often seen by scholars and biblical interpreters as having parallels to occupation. In the first century, this part of the world was under occupation by Roman power, a reality the writer of Mark highlights in later chapters.

Biblical scholar Cynthia Kitteredge writes, "This conflict [between the occupying powers and those being occupied] is described in violent terms. People who suffer the effects of being occupied or "possessed" lose their ability to control their

movements and their voices; either they are immobilized or compelled to move violently and destructively”.

Then there are the “Unclean spirits”. The first century Jewish community was a place where there were strict and specific codes governing which people were considered to be unclean – ritually, bodily, and spiritually– and how to deal with them accordingly. Perceived cleanliness was literally next to godliness in Hellenistic Jewish culture. The cleaner you were in body and spirit, the closer you could be to God. These rules were not simply spiritual codes. They were meant to keep the Jewish people safe. They were intended to help you know your place in a highly stratified society. The rules kept the peace and allowed them to live in a tenuous harmony with their Roman occupiers.

From the moment Jesus steps on the scene in the Gospel of Mark, he subverts the rules that govern this community, blurring the lines between what is perceived as good and what is seen as evil. With this, his first recorded miracle, Jesus walks straight across the boundary of clean and unclean, disregarding the accepted cultural understanding of what it means to be inside the community of God. Not only that, but he speaks and acts with authority. He is the son of a tradesman from a poor family, part of an occupied nation of people, yet he commands even spirits in a manner that defies the religious leaders, or the ruling government to challenge him.

This brief and bewildering miracle story, with its imagery of clean and unclean, teaches us something about the dynamics of community: insiders and outsiders, the powerful and the powerless, control and who has the power to exert it. This story is about transgressing social boundaries and God's call to us to dismantle these imaginary lines so that we can be transformed by the love of God and extend that love to others.

The community out of which Mark's gospel originated was powerless and poor in a country occupied by a powerful empire. The theology of a God with power over illness, disability, and danger was for them, lifesaving good news.

Even though the ancient world view behind this story, that attributes illness to unclean spirits, may be medically outdated, this story is good news for us here and now as well. There remain in our modern life forces that wreak havoc within individuals, communities, and countries --addiction, sexual abuse, gun violence, greed, and racial hatred to name a few.

We often believe that if we can simply create strict enough rules, and draw wide enough boundaries around the perimeters of our neighborhoods; if we can scrub every last hint of odor from our bodies, and wash away every sign of human frailty from our skin, we can keep chaos, and messiness, danger and despair at bay.

But no matter how many how many rules we follow, or how we try to sanitize our bodies, our homes, our neighborhoods, or our churches, we cannot expel the chaos from our own unclean spirits.

Author David Goetz once wrote the following observation of modern American life:

“All sensible suburbanites bow to the Deity of Control. The Deity of Control commands that we scrub away the chaos and filth that skulk in the shadows of our highly managed, perfection-driven lives.

In return, we are granted the meticulously mulched lawn, athletic children with perfectly straight teeth and conversation-stopping A.C.T. scores, and the Holy Grail: the perception of success from our suburban peers, whom, truth be told, we don't really like much.

“At one of our neighborhood pools”, Goetz continues, “placards for safety adorn every piece of equipment – fences, slides, chairs – including the warning: “Additional Rules may be added, if deemed necessary by the management.”

Additional rules are always deemed necessary. Rules bridle chaos. Rules disinfect life. Rules hedge against uncertainty, and, God forbid, only slightly above average children.

However, the Deity of Control can often fail us when messy tragedies and obstacles in life take over. Sooner or later, most of us awaken to the glorious and troubling notion that we were never in control; that imperfection is a kind of grace.

You can't work or earn your way into it.

You just fall.

It lies below, it lies beyond.

It comes to you unbidden.”

We all find a kind of salvation when we let go of the illusion that we are in control. It is a salvation not unlike that which Jesus brings about in the life of the man he encounters at Capernaum.

This is not a salvation that separates us, or that marks us as good rule followers, in contrast with those whom we have damned for their failure to get in line. Instead, like the possessed man, this salvation is connected to freedom and restoration.

The possessed man was freed from the unclean spirit that plagued him, making it possible for him to be restored to life within his own community.

In the same way, the grace that comes when we no longer bow to the 'Deity of Control' frees us from our own demons, from the isolation that the *illusion of control* and the desire for perfection inflict on our lives. Salvation does not come to us simply because of what we do or what we know. It's not simply knowing the difference between good and evil; for even the demons in the gospel understood that. It's not about creating rules or following them to the letter. Salvation takes place in the context of relationship, both between humans and God, and between humans and each other. It is by allowing Christ to cross the boundaries we create around ourselves, and allowing our lives to be transformed by God's unconditional acceptance of us, that we are set free. It is when we, in turn live the message of the Gospel by our love for all people that we ensure our communal salvation and redemption.

To God, each and every one of us is precious, just as we are, with all the dirt and brokenness we try to hide from the world. This is why God came to live among us. Jesus went into the places where nobody else wanted to go.

He moved in toward the things that might have made others run screaming in the other direction. He was willing to go into the dirt, into the unsavory – into battle with the demons – *for us*, in order to restore us to community.

This doesn't mean that Jesus was unconcerned with our human impurity but that he was willing to meet us there - right in the midst of it. When no one else would touch us, Christ reached out for us, stood beside us, and held us in his arms. Even now, Christ is willing to bring purity and holiness to places and people who *we* might have considered beyond its reach, even if those people are our own selves. Christ calls us to nothing less.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Let us pray: Holy One, we come before you today as we are, with all our imperfections. Regardless of our desire to appear put-together, well-rehearsed, fully prepared, and perfectly content, you see us clearly. You know all the ways we are broken and all the ways we have contributed to the brokenness of others. You know the questions and doubts that haunt us. You know our discontent, even as we

count our blessings. Thank you, God. For you not only see us exactly as we are, you love us fully and unconditionally.

God, may we truly receive the love you offer, and may we find the courage to share it with others, for we are all imperfect. We each carry our own burdens and wrestle with our own demons, and sometimes we don't hide them so well. Grant us the grace to bless and not judge, heal and not hurt. In the face of all we don't know, may we hold onto to what we do know: that your love knows no boundaries and is for us all.

For our world, we pray that we might be able to withhold judgment long enough to see – even for a moment – from another's point of view; to recognize that diversity and difference is not a threat to some ideal of sameness but a gift that invites us to new discoveries. Where there is war and suffering and injustice, teach us a better way. In our nation, we pray that our politicians might learn to see compromise and imperfect solutions as necessary tools of public service, even if it means giving up control and relinquishing tightly-held goals. In our families, we pray for patience and healing and the grace to surrender long-standing grudges. In our church, especially on this day when we will elect new and returning leaders, we pray that these leaders would bring their whole, less than perfect selves, to their service, and that we would support them with love and grace, even if, in their efforts to faithfully heed your call, they make lead us down unexpected and unknown paths; even if they make mistakes. Having been forgiven, give us opportunities to practice

forgiveness so that together, we who are the body of Christ, may glimpse what makes your kingdom whole and wholly extraordinary: the perfect imperfections of people who reveal your light and love through all their broken places.

God of healing and wholeness, we are perhaps most perplexed and confused and dismayed by the imperfections of our bodies and our minds. And yet we trust that your presence and your love is with all those who suffer, physically or mentally, and we claim that presence today for those we know and love who are in particular need: Judy, Andrew, Akeya, Anne, Bill, Marlene, Eliseo, Mollie, Elizabeth, Ward, Sue, Lynn, and Louise, as well as Mark and Bill, whose loved ones left prayer requests this week in our carpenter's box. We pray for all who do the difficult work of caregiving, and for those whose suffering is known only to you.

God, when we fail, as we all have done and will do again, remind us that your love never fails. Your love never ends. Even as we seek to imagine and imitate such love, and fail, even at that, hold us close and shower us with grace. Teach us through your Son, Jesus, who knows our struggles because he endured his own, and who only became the Christ after what looked like the disastrous and public failure of the crucifixion, which your love transformed into the quiet triumph of the empty tomb. Hear us now, as we join our voices together in the prayer he taught us was enough, saying, Our Father...