

## **“Commanding Unclean Spirits”**

Mark 1:21-28

29 January 2012

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

West Walworth: Zion United Methodist Church

### **Mark 1:21-28**

They 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, convulsing him 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.

Prayer.

I knocked on the door quietly,  
 Hoping not to startle the soul within.  
 “Hello,” I said just above a whisper  
 In an effort to establish a non-threatening presence;  
 Attempting to set the stage of  
 Gentleness and trust from the start.  
 “Come in,” sneered the voice  
 Of a cornered, recoiled, tormented person,  
 “but keep your distance.  
 I don’t want anything you’re selling.  
 And the voices tell me not to trust you in the least.”  
 And thus it would begin;  
 Yet another of the hundreds of psychiatric assessments  
 I’ve conducted in my life,  
 On behalf of a Psychiatrist,  
 Of individuals who suffer from chronic schizophrenia,  
 Who’ve stopped taking their medicine,  
 And now spiral downward into a world of uncontrollable psychosis.

In this world,  
 Hallucinations, delusions, and paranoia can become so real

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They are personified.  
 Visions become apparitions.  
 Apparitions become as real as the hand at the end of your arms.  
 The voice of God comes from the radio or television.  
 The impossible suddenly appears possible.  
 One's enemies, both real and imagined, appear to be revealed.  
 The medical community today calls it Schizophrenia.  
 The street calls it Crazy.  
 Our ancestors called it possession.

In my youth I would have enjoyed explaining away  
 The mental health realities  
 Associated with ignorant, ancient people.  
 It would have been an attempt to justify  
 My own professional competence,  
 My own inadequacies of faith,  
 And my own discomfort with the realities of evil.  
 "Paranoia and possession were cured,"  
 I would have mused about today's Gospel,  
 "By Jesus, the Great Psychiatrist."  
 In one fell swoop,  
 I would have done injustice to the Word;  
 Equating the power of Jesus with  
 The skills of a therapist and  
 The efficacy of a pharmacist's pills.

The older I've grown,  
 I've become more dissatisfied with the answers of my spit and vinegar youth.  
 They may have served well when examined in seminary  
 Or before the Board of Ordained Ministry,  
 But, not so much anymore.  
 I'm more content to live with contradictions.  
 I'm less threatened by what can't be explained or reasoned.  
 Mystery is now trumping certainty in spades,  
 And I'm at peace with that.  
 The confidence of age enables me to speak the Gospel  
 Unlike any period in my past.  
 So, today; I will pass on the easily explainable  
 And invite us to consider our Gospel's more challenging edge:  
 That of being possessed by an unclean spirit.

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There is a certain uncomfortable nature with the word "possession."  
 Possession elicits memories of dark horror movies of the past:  
 The Omen, The Exorcist, and The Shinning.  
 That, my friends, can scare the snot out of anyone.  
 But what if we can get over our fears  
 And take a second look at the possessions in our Gospel?  
 Three times the subject of our lesson  
 - this unnamed man -  
 Is described as "a man with an unclean spirit."  
 Unclean means he is cut off.  
 With each new seizure he would lose his status as clean  
 And would be separated by force  
 To live and beg outside the city walls.  
 His disability kept him in perpetual purgatory.  
 Unclean doesn't mean ignorant;  
 It just means he doesn't fit in,  
 He doesn't conform to conventional Jewish laws or society.  
 After so many efforts to be made clean in the ceremonial baths,  
 He had just given up and given in,  
 Banished from family and friends,  
 Left to seethe and writhe with growing bitterness, resentment and anger.  
 He is left in this pathetic state  
 ... until that day when he learns that Jesus is teaching in the Synagogue  
 He slips in through the back door  
 And raises his voice  
 Amidst certain gasps and sighs of disbelief.  
 Jesus commands the unclean spirit to be silent and to come out of him.  
 With a convulsion and a scream,  
 BOOM!  
 Out it comes.  
 This man is rude, insulting, insightful, and paranoid;  
 Yet, his unclean spirit yields to the command of Jesus.  
 He doesn't conform to Jewish cleanliness laws,  
 Yet he is transformed by what possesses Jesus.

Yes, you heard me right:  
 He is transformed by what possesses Jesus.  
 The idea that Jesus was likewise possessed  
 Came to me brand new this week.

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Every week I listen to scholars from Luther Seminary on one of my subscribed podcasts.  
 (Sermon Brainwave: Brainwave 217: Lectionary Texts for Jan. 29, 2012. As found at  
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx>)

This past week, these theologians rightly assert that  
 Jesus is possessed by the Holy Spirit.

Only ten verses prior to our lesson this morning,

- We heard three weeks ago -

That the Spirit descended like a dove

And came upon Jesus

As he emerged from Jordan's baptismal waters.

That's when Jesus was first possessed by the Spirit.

It's the same possessed Spirit that brings Jesus to the Synagogue in Capernaum

And allows him to teach with authority.

Bottom line:

The Holy Spirit that possessed Jesus

Trumps

The unclean spirit that disabled this man.

When we translate this fact two thousand years forward

And across language and cultures,

We are given the Essential truth from the Word

That can transform you and me today:

***Whatever possesses you can be cast out of you by the Holy Spirit of God.***

Whatever possesses you can be cast out of you.

This begs the introspective question for each of us:

What possesses you?

Is it addiction to drugs, alcohol, or gambling?

Is it obsessive thoughts of revenge, envy, or hatred?

Are you possessed by thoughts of sex and pornography?

Or is it that covet-ness envy of someone else's wealth, possessions, or accomplishments?

Competition can become an obsessive possession

Either on the playing field, in the orchestra pit, or in the work place.

Is that what claims you?

Whatever possesses you can be cast out of you.

Think of the faith it took that unclean man to walk into the Synagogue and confront Jesus!

Wow!

While impressive, we don't need that much.

Scripture says that it only takes faith the size of a mustard seed to save us.

Speak the name of Jesus and be healed.

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Ask for his Holy Spirit to cast out what ever demon possesses you  
And it will be done for you.  
That equates in my mind to a simple, humble, silent prayer of acceptance:  
Jesus, I am yours.

Lastly, allow me to make the observation  
That, though the demons that possess  
Any one of us once,  
And are cast out by the Holy Spirit of God,  
Can return and infect us again.  
To avoid what has traditionally been called “backsliding”  
Reasonable changes must be made:  
Living in the scriptures,  
Surrounding yourselves with other Christians,  
Engaging in the discipline of prayer and devotion,  
Intentionally reaching out in Christ’s love to help our neighbors.  
Unless we make these reasonable changes in our lives  
We remain vulnerable to being possessed by unclean spirits again and again.

Dearly beloved:  
Hear the Good News!  
Say the name of Jesus and be saved.  
Be the will of Christ  
And allow yourself to be possessed only by the Holy Spirit  
And you’ll never be turned back again.  
Amen.