

Jesus the Exorcist

Mark 1:21-28

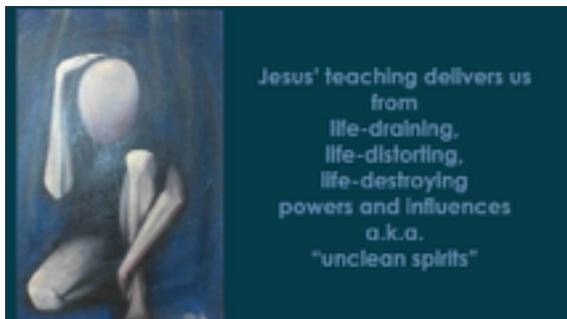
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February 1, 2015

4th Sunday after Epiphany

Since Epiphany we have been reading through the first chapter of Mark's gospel a few verses at a time - kind of a like a slow motion viewing of a movie. These opening scenes describe the context and the nature of Christ's mission in the world. The story begins with John the Baptizer's ministry of preparing Israel for the coming of the Lord — their God. Jesus, too, comes to be baptized. As the carpenter's son surfaces from the waters of the Jordan River, he sees the heavens torn apart, the Spirit descending into him, and hears a voice declaring "You are my Son, the beloved." The same Spirit heavenly drives Jesus, still dripping wet, out into the wilderness where he is tested by Satan: will his mission cater to human appetites and aspirations or will it be in tune with God? Jesus emerges after forty days in the desert proclaiming that God's kingdom is at hand — proclaiming that God is here now — repent and believe, turn around, retune, and trust in God who is everywhere and always present.

Last week we pondered Jesus' invitation to follow him and become fishers of people — to be trained by Jesus to mentor coach, and guide each other as we grow into children of God. We saw that for Andrew and Simon that meant letting go of their fishing nets, for James and John that meant letting go of their father. Sometimes we have to let go of things and people in our lives before we can claim our identity as children of God, worthy of love and respect, capable of making a positive difference in our lives.



In today's lesson, Jesus launches his mission in the seaside town of Capernaum, in the synagogue, on the Sabbath — with an exorcism — with an act of deliverance. Actually the exorcism occurred within the context of Jesus teaching in the synagogue. The point of the story seems to be that Jesus the teacher is also Jesus the exorcist, or as I prefer, Jesus the deliverer. The teaching and the exorcism go together — the casting out of the unclean spirit demonstrates and illustrates what the teaching

means. Jesus' message that God is here now is not just words but a life-giving reality in the midst of life-stealing, even death-dealing, powers and influences.

In the world of Jesus, unclean spirits were believed to cause fevers, diseases of every kind, the loss of eyesight, hearing and speech, physically crippling disabilities, epilepsy, mental illness, uncontrolled anger, violent outbursts, addictions, and a whole host of anti-social behaviors. Today all of these things can be treated and alleviated - although not always cured - by modern

medicine and /or professional counseling. Consequently, those of us who are pastors, teachers and care-givers in Christ's church today are not exorcists. We are trained, not to do exorcisms, but to provide pastoral and spiritual care which often includes referring people to medical and counseling professionals.

Our role as Christian care-givers is to affirm God's presence in the midst of situations that are life-draining, life-distorting, and life-destroying. Perhaps even importantly, our task is to separate the person from the situation. To lift up the truth that every one of us is, first and foremost, a child of God, worthy of love and respect, capable of making a positive difference in the world today. No one's true self is cancer patient or alcoholic or drug addict or bi-polar or disabled or homeless or an ex-con or whatever label is being used to describe their situation. That is not who we are. That is just the situation, the circumstances in which our true self is struggling to survive. Often the best thing we can do is to alleviate or change the situation and circumstances.

If we are to be like Jesus, not just teachers and preachers, but deliverers we have to stop blaming and shaming each other for the life-stealing, death-dealing situations we find ourselves in. Please notice that Jesus doesn't do that! He casts the unclean spirit out, not the man who was possessed by it.

I wonder where Christ the deliverer is at work in the world today. What life-draining, life-distorting, life-destroying powers and influences is Christ confronting in our world?

Professor David Lose suggests that we recognize the presence of unclean spirits by their behavior: rather than bless, they curse; rather than build up, they tear down; rather than encourage, they disparage; rather than promote love, they show hate; rather than draw us together, they seek to split us apart. They tell us over and over again that we are not beloved of God, or God-pleasing in anyway. The unclean spirits at work in the world are those forces that rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for them.¹ Unclean spirits in our world might include things like attitudes, prejudices and "isms" of different kinds (e.g. racism, sexism, individualism, consumerism and so forth). Some of these may be socially approved or even backed up by laws.

Here's a sampling of things that I read in the news this week that have made me wonder how we ought to be about Christ's mission of delivering God's children from life-draining, life-distorting, life-destroying powers and influences.

In 2000, Portugal (a small country in Europe) decriminalized all drugs, transferred all the money they used to spend on arresting and jailing drug addicts to providing housing, jobs and counseling. In the 15 years since, drug use has fallen by 50%.² Based on this experience, I

¹ David Lose, "Possessed," available at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1608>.

² Johann Hari, "The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered, and It Is Not What You Think," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-real-cause-of-addicti_b_65006936.html.

wonder if jailing drug addicts is more like casting out the man than casting out the unclean spirit that taken control of his life.

Tuesday, January 27th marked the 70th anniversary of the Soviet army's liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau the Nazi concentration camp and killing center where at least 1.1 million people were murdered for no other reason than that they were Jews or Polish or Romani or Jehovah's Witnesses or homosexuals or Soviet prisoners of war.³ I wonder if the Soviet forces who entered Auschwitz 70 years ago realized that they were Christ's agents in that time and place?

Wednesday, January 28th the State of South Carolina vacated the convictions of the "Friendship Nine." Fifty-four years ago, these African American men were sent to a county prison camp for taking part in a sit-in at a local lunch counter. On Wednesday, both the prosecutor and the judge apologized to the men saying that they should never have been charged in the first place.⁴ I wonder why it took so long to acknowledge the injustice.

Patricia Todd, Alabama's first openly gay legislator threatened to expose the marital infidelities of lawmakers who are defying a federal court ruling that found her state's ban on gay marriage unconstitutional, saying "Before casting your stone at me and my family, why don't you look at you and your family.... Have you been true and faithful with your partner, are you a good parent?.... I will not stand by and allow legislators to talk about 'family values' when they have affairs."⁵ I wonder at the audacity and hypocrisy of anyone saying that children are better off with dysfunctional heterosexual parents than with a faithful same-gender couple.

Jesus' opening act in the Gospel of Mark shows us that he is a teacher who walks the talk. He does what he says. He enacts what he proclaims — God's life-giving presence here now in the midst of all the life-stealing, death-dealing powers and influences that surround us. He calls us, his disciples to pay attention, to observe, to learn, and to do what he does — lift up the child of God and cast out the thing that possesses him.

Please pray with me:

Christ, be our light. Shine in our hearts and in our church. Help us to see and resist those powers and influences that would have us curse rather than bless, tear down rather than build up, disparage rather than encourage, sow hate rather than promote love, split us apart rather than draw us together. Amen.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auschwitz_concentration_camp

⁴ "54 Years Later, South Carolina Court Clear 'Friendship Nine'" at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/29/us/south-carolina-court-clears-friendship-nine-in-1961-sit-in.html?_r=0.

⁵ "Ala. lawmaker threatens to 'out' same-sex marriage opponents' peccadilloes" at <http://wtvr.com/2015/01/28/ala-lawmaker-threatens-to-out-same-sex-marriage-opponents-peccadilloes/>.