

*Possession*  
Epiphany 4B  
PPC  
31 January 2021

Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
Mark 1:21-28

All week I have been pondering this man with the “unclean spirit”. Has he come to the synagogue this day in hopes of meeting Jesus and being healed? In light of the many conspiracy theories being promoted in our nation today, I wonder if we could understand them through the lens of an “unclean spirit”? Blaming last summer’s wild fires in California on a Jewish cabal led by George Soros who have sent laser beams through the atmosphere to start the fires qualifies as some sort of evil spirit lurking among us. How have so many of us come to believe such evil thoughts? Are we afraid to name the unclean spirits? Particularly in the case of this man in the synagogue, how does the unclean spirit recognize the true identity of Jesus?

Commentators on this pericope, or this story, point out that the chiasmic structure of the story is typical of Mark. In a few short verses we have a “sandwich” story - a story within a story. The reading starts out focused on the authority with which Jesus teaches and then abruptly segues into the story of the man with the unclean spirit and then returns to the congregation recognizing the authority that Jesus possesses. We learn in this encounter with the man with the unclean spirit that Jesus does have the authority to speak and he also has the ability to act in a way that underlines his authority.

What astounds people at first is that Jesus is teaching as if he - not Moses - has authority to speak and act. In his encounter with this ill man Jesus lives out the Law of Moses and enacts what it means to follow the Law in love. Persons with demons, the

gospels acknowledge, are not inherently bad people. The demon may be part of the person's reality but is not the person herself.

If we do a short word-study, it is also pertinent that the word translated from the Greek as "rebuked" or "censured" has as its primary meaning "to honor". Its tertiary meaning is "to penalize". The context here does not allow for the word to be translated as honored. Was there a purpose behind the use of this word? How can a word mean honor and censure? Could it be that Jesus must first recognize and honor the unclean spirit as a genuine force, taking it seriously, before commanding the spirit to be silent and exit? He doesn't deny the existence of this spirit. Instead, by first honoring its existence Jesus is able to help the man who has this spirit caged inside of him. The man can see the unclean spirit within him so that he is able to separate himself from it and be healed.

The place where we encounter the holiness of God is always also a place where we encounter human uncleanliness. That place where the pain and the hurts and the fear and the anger reside. We know that as the Church we claim to welcome sinners for we recognize that all of us fit into that category. Whether or not this is reality is questionable as for centuries we have denied the LGBTQ community and women the right to be full members of our church communities. I wonder what I would do - what we, as a community would do, if someone who believed in the fantastical theories of Q Anon, came into our sanctuary. Honestly, I have mixed feelings about that. We think that the Christian response is to always love someone but in that process we often choose to overlook the unclean spirit, to deny its existence.

That is why it is so compelling to consider that Jesus took the unclean spirit seriously and recognized that healing would only take place after it was expelled. It was imperative to acknowledge that the unclean spirit existed.

People are not healed when a wound is allowed to fester. You can't sew up a person's gaping wound without cleaning out the wound first. This pandemic has caused many people - children, youth, and adults - to be dealing with psychic wounds. How will we prepare to deal with these? Psychological wounds are every bit as real as physical wounds. Just ask a soldier or a woman who has spent years in an abusive relationship who are now living with PTSD.

There are many kinds of demons that hold us in bondage. We are today, as in those ancient times in Palestine, caught up in dysfunction and sin; held in shackles as we confront the fragility of our democracy and those who would destroy it because of their desires for wealth and power. The struggle with human finitude and failure is very much alive in this day and age, even if we choose to ignore it by not naming it.

Authority in Mark's Gospel is not about power. Rather, it is a willingness that has everything to do with justice being served. How do we regard Jesus and his teaching with authority? By whose authority are we led? Do we expect that by accepting the authority with which Jesus teaches we will never face painful decisions or unclean spirits right here in our place of worship?

There is an inherent tension in the act of preaching. Often, we are confronted with teachings we really don't want to hear. Loving everybody isn't always about accepting unhealthy behavior in our midst. Conflict often arises among us, as followers of Jesus, and we aren't comfortable with that. Naming the unclean spirits that at one

time or another may live in our hearts may cause us to be angry. Who wants to be called a white supremacist? Watching the master prophet, proclaimer, and preacher of the Good News of God's Unconditional Acceptance of All, we see the conundrum at work. If God loves us all unconditionally, then do we have to accept all behaviors? How do we love those who cause harm to others? How do we take care of the victims of predatory behavior? Should we just pretend that unclean spirits don't cause any harm or can we look to Jesus and learn something new?

In one church that I served, we were forced to confront the reality of pedophilic behavior. The accused was the husband of our organist. After much discussion by the Session, it was finally decided that I, along with two members of the Personnel Committee, would consult legal counsel. His counsel was that the only power we had was through the organist as an employee of the church. This man had made a very visible exit from the PC(USA) in the year before I arrived because of the decision made by our Church to allow the ordination of gays and lesbians. So, while he continued to sing in our choir because we needed men, he made a quite dramatic exit from our sanctuary after the anthem. Session made the decision to tell the organist that a condition of her employment was that her husband could not continue to sing in our choir. This made both of them so angry that our organist quit. There are many more details to this story but as you can well imagine, this decision caused quite a lot of conflict within the congregation. This man had been a professor at one of the local colleges (although we later learned that he had been banished from the campus because of his predatory behavior) and other members of our church would or could not believe that there was any truth in our findings. To my amazement, despite the

evidence, there were, mostly male, members of our congregation who refused to believe the truth.

Naming the illness, the unclean spirit, caused a split in the congregation.

What harm do we perpetrate in the Church in the name of love? We don't know one another very well if we are willing to look at a person's status and assume that people who are white, well-educated, professionals could not be capable of housing an unclean spirit. We are afraid of naming the sickness in the name of love. Before we named this man's evil behaviour, the congregation believed they all loved one another.

When the church, the temple, the mosque become indistinguishable from the surrounding culture we must wonder if that demon resides within. There is a tension between the sacramental and the prophetic. All things reveal God but nothing reveals God fully. Every word can point to the holy but no word encompasses the holy. Here, perhaps, is an answer to what authority means in our faith. Authority is always relative, historic, and imperfect, whether religious, political or biblical. Are we able to hear when Jesus calls out our own unclean thinking? Are we willing to listen for that still, small, voice of calm that speaks to us above the noise of the universe? If we are possessed by other thoughts and unwilling to consider that we are wrong, we do not recognize the authority of which Jesus speaks.

Divine authority is a blend of love, power, and justice. When we consider authority, we must ask ourselves these questions: Does an authority figure promote justice, creativity, and truth? Does an authority figure seek what is truly best for the community, including honoring diverse opinions and lifestyles? Does an authority figure enable people to be more creative, more adventurous, and more compassionate?

Today's readings promote a spiritual practice that leads us in God's ways and does not tolerate those unclean spirits that would hurt the community. Discovering our personal authority involves a commitment to prayer, devotional readings, communities of support and accountability, and concern for others. They also challenge us to embody the values we affirm each Sunday when we gather in this sacred space. If any would act in ways that would afflict the good of the community, we must question their intentions even though they may make claims to be acting for the good.

Hearing truth is challenging for our egos. It can make us angry. This is unavoidable. Seeing our shadow side makes us uncomfortable and more often than not we want to escape to that place where everything we are is good. We can spend much time in hiding from that shadow side. This community can lead us to discovery by loving us and walking through the darkness with us.

In this time of conspiracy stories, of lies and finger-pointing, we must not forget that in following Jesus we are freed to name what we see. We know that is the only way to deal with behavior that is so destructive. We know where true authority lives. We follow that light. Jesus will not fail us. We know what it is to love another.

AMEN.

AMEN.