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Who is Jesus? - Exorcising Demons

Mark 1:21-28 (MSG and NRSV mixed)

Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus went to the synagogue and spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident, with such authority—unlike the scribes. Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out, “What business do you have here with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know what you’re up to! You’re the Holy One of God, and you’ve come to destroy us!” Jesus rebuked him, saying: “Quiet! Get out of him!” The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out. Everyone there was incredulous, buzzing with curiosity. “What’s going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” News of this traveled fast and was soon all over Galilee.

I have to be honest... I've never preached on one of Jesus' exorcisms... I have only ever skipped it over, chosen another scripture from the lectionary, or crafted sermon series' far from this complicated topic. I, like many of you, hear the word exorcism and think of the film, "The Exorcist", with the girl and her spinning head. I picture Catholic priests with holy water and incantations... something I'm not trained for or even versed in to discuss theologically. When people have asked whether I could perform an exorcism, I've answered something like, "we don't really do those in the Methodist tradition."

But rather than simply dismiss the topic as it rolled around in the lectionary this year, I thought it high time to dig a little deeper, to see what Mark might be trying to tell us about Jesus, and about ourselves. Because if people, still today, are asking me if I perform exorcisms, then maybe there's something to that question... or maybe there's a question behind the question that I as a pastor, and we as the church are called to respond to and do our best to answer. Maybe what they're saying is that something terrible has taken hold of someone they love and they're out of options... maybe they're asking if we, as the Body of Christ, can help them deal with the evil that is in this world... Maybe it's time that we respond with something more than silence and uncomfortable dismissal...

First century Jews and Gentiles came to Jesus asking those kinds of questions and he didn't laugh, he took them seriously. Many times people, believing their loved ones to be afflicted by unclean spirits, sought out Jesus for relief, and other times the unclean spirits cried out spontaneously, apart from any human request for help – this is what we heard in our scripture today. Did you know that in Mark's gospel, there are 13 healing stories, and 4 of them are exorcisms. You can use another word for what happens in chapters 1,5,7,& 9, but this dimension of Jesus' ministry remains. Jesus, according to Mark, casts out many demons.

Sometimes we try to talk our way around this subject by attributing the talk of demons to ancient understanding (or misunderstanding) of disease. Since our scientific understanding is much more advanced

today, there couldn't be any reason to delve into the demon possession topic... those ancients just didn't know what they were talking about. But I wonder the price we pay for talking our way **around** the subject. First of all, people are healed in the gospel and there's no mention of demons, so we can't just combine the two and move on... But, what if the stories about demons aren't ultimately stories about demons... Sure it's intriguing to look into the 1st century worldviews and how Greeks talked about demons and the Jews talked about angels and spirits. It's probably important to understand that these distinct views are co-mingling in the minds of the evangelists and therefore in the stories as they come to us. But what if the NT is the wrong place to look. Maybe we need to look into our contemporary experience – in our own lives, and the lives of those around us. What if we're looking for an explanation of how demons or unclean spirits are to blame for our deepest, most treatment resistant trouble.

I'm borrowing from a couple of British scholars when I say that the Gospels were not trying to describe what demons were... they were **A** way to describe an evil force, an opposition to God, not the **ONLY** way. Evil, this much abused word, simply means *that* which is opposed to God's dream for the way the world should be, centered on love and justice, righteousness and the celebration of ALL life. Such an opposition would leave the world's most vulnerable people bearing the weight of a broken world, through unjust actions they did not take, and oppressive decisions they were never given the power to make. Jesus, confronted those demons, this evil, personified in unclean spirits, so the community could be made whole again.

There are plenty of those kinds of demons disrupting our communities today.

- On Tuesday, we heard of another school shooting, adding to the 30,000 people killed by firearms each year in our country,
- The proliferation of drug use and abuse, as the overdose rate continues to climb to new highs,
- The hunger that plagues 1 in 6 Americans and countless world wide,
- abuse, human trafficking, assault; the list could go on and on...

These demons and unclean spirits that plague our communities, that oppose God's vision of love, justice, and peace in our world today – these are the afflictions that Jesus came to exorcise. He cast them out, and he taught his disciples to do the same. We, who follow in this tradition of discipleship, while we might not feel qualified to battle such demons... we too are called to take a stand, to speak up, to confront these powers of evil in our midst.

What does it look like for US to rebuke the unclean spirits in our day? It happens at work when you speak up for the vulnerable people your employer is about to roll over. It happens at home when you help your children resist and reject the voices that teach them at an early age that they ought to set goals lower than what their heart speaks to them. It happens every time you hear those demonic voices of resignation, of settling for less, of disempowerment whispering in your own ear and you find the strength to change the tape... to listen for a different message. It happens when we claim our true identity as Beloved Children of God, and resist those unclean spirits trying to name and claim us so they can do with us what they will.

It happens because we've been given authority over these voices, not authority over other human beings, not the power to name ANY human being as evil - but the power to assert God's vision and God's way of love in the face of spiritual forces that continue to oppose it. The power to name and rebuke forces that drain us of our humanity. The power to envision healing and then fight for it, to envision justice and then call for it, to envision wholeness and assert that IT WILL BE SO. We have been given the power of exorcism. To stand against powers that deny human beings anything LESS than God's vision for their future, for our future, a vision of abundant life in community.

And you don't need an exorcism class, or any special tools, chants, daggers, sacred relics, there is no supernatural stuff to be aware of. All God needs is your heart, your life, and your voice, to speak of God's love and God's promises and God's dreams for hurting and hungry people where you live. We need to walk in the path set before us by Jesus, who came, anointed by the Spirit to "bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." May we continue to live out our calling, to live courageously, casting out the spirits in our midst that threaten God's love and grace. Amen!