

Dealing with Demons
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“Dealing with Demons” Homily Pilgrim Church UCC February 1, 2015—Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (Mark 1:21-28)

A friend once remarked that being a Lectionary Preacher is like going on a blind date every week and never knowing who’s waiting for you. One can choose whether to preach on the Hebrew Bible reading, Psalm, Gospel, or other New Testament reading for that Sunday, yet they go together. This week I could choose among Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Psalm 111, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, or Mark 1:21-28. The Gospels speak most to my heart but there are times when none of the options may be particularly up your alley. That’s the discipline—finding meaning in a text since Sunday arrives whether you’re ready or not. If I was a Charismatic or Pentecostal minister preaching to a Pentecostal congregation, we may be all over today’s Gospel about Jesus’ exorcism. But being a United Church of Christ minister preaching to New England Congregationalists—well, this could be a bad blind date for all of us.

So now that that’s out of the way—let’s get right down to demons and Jesus dealing with them. First we’ll set the scene: Jesus is in Capernaum and goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach. He’s such a good teacher that pretty soon everyone is turning to each other and saying, “Can you believe how awesome this Jesus is? He’s teaching with power and authority.” Then a man with an unclean spirit cries 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.” Jesus responds, “Be silent and come out of him!”^[1] And the man convulses and cries out loudly but the demon is finally gone. The gathered people are all the more amazed—who is this guy? A new teaching, with authority? He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him! Jesus’ fame begins to spread throughout all of Galilee.

Don’t you wonder what Jesus did after this healing in our story? Did he just turn back to the people gathered and continue on with the lesson? Don’t you wonder what the man did after he was healed? Did he run from the synagogue jumping for joy? Did he say, “Hey, make room for me in the circle—this guy knows what he’s doing!” Our story isn’t just about exorcisms but about our words and our actions lining up. Jesus teaches and then heals with power and authority—he practiced what he preached. And that’s a worthy take away.

But let’s not let go of the demon so lightly. We modern people use other words for demons, but it doesn’t mean that demons are no longer among us. Haven’t we met someone who’s going through a really bad divorce or break-up and it’s like they can’t come back to themselves? Haven’t we met someone trying to get sober, leaving behind drugs or alcohol, and it’s like addiction will not be so easily dismissed? Haven’t we met someone who faces debilitating depression and finds it hard to even get out of bed in the morning? Haven’t we met someone who experiences such physical pain that it’s all they can focus on day in and day out? Haven’t we met someone who’s survived abuse or violence or war and they can’t bear to talk about it? Haven’t we met someone who’s had something terrible happen in their lives and they become like a shell of themselves? We use other words for demons, but it doesn’t mean that demons are no longer among us. Maybe they’re just not the bad spirit variety with horns and tails and claws we may picture when we hear the word “demon.”

Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber explains demons by saying, “Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has named and claimed us as God’s own. But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong: capitalism, the

weight-loss industrial complex, our parents, kids at school—they all have a go at telling us who we are. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation. Maybe demons are defined as anything other than God that tries to tell us who we are.”[2] In other words, we are not all those things that ensnare us and prevent us from seeing the light of Christ in our world and within ourselves. We are so much more than our demons. We don't have to be defined by them, not when God has named us and claimed us as God's own.

Here's an example that Nadia Bolz-Weber shared. Martin Luther once shuttered himself away in a castle to translate the Greek Bible into German. Sometimes we forget what a gift this is. Just as I turn to my Bible every week to choose the Lectionary text, all of you can open up your Bibles and read and contemplate these stories. If you preached this morning on Mark Chapter 1 verses 21-28—what would you have said? We have the ability to read the Bible in our spoken language—this was one of the greatest gifts of the Protestant Reformation, the empowerment of the laity by translating the Bible into vernacular languages.

So when Martin Luther was holed up in that castle translating the Bible into German he struggled with doubt and discouragement from what he named the devil. Remember the lines in his hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God:" "And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us. We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure: one little word shall fell him."

Luther felt that he was part of a world filled with demons. We can pass that off as 16th Century craziness or we can see some truth for us today. He wasn't in good health—many scholars think that he suffered from kidney stones, vertigo, heart problems, arthritis, a cataract in his eye, and a digestive disorder. Luther was known to throw inkpots around to scare away his demons. He would shout around the castle during his period of Biblical translation, "I am baptized!"[3] Basically saying I am named and claimed by God.

Martin Luther dealt with demons—the demons of self-doubt, the pain from his health conditions, and the stress from constant battles when he was doing his best to reform the Church and change the way it had always been done. What did he do to contend with demons? He went around those castle grounds yelling, "I am baptized! Take that ya haters!" Which you should totally use the next time you reach a breaking point! Maybe I added that last bit, but the point is that we all have our stuff and sometimes we get so stuck in the mud that it's hard to get back on solid ground and see ourselves the way that God sees us. As God's good and beautiful and holy creation.

To look at a story like we heard in Mark's Gospel or Martin Luther shouting around those castle grounds and to feel smart and self-satisfied and think: ugh, it's an exorcism? That's not something that happened back then and I certainly don't see what this has to do with me now is missing the point entirely. Demons don't care if you believe in them or not. The great preacher Fred Craddock once said, "Not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in our world.”[4] It doesn't mean that we don't have things in our lives that hold us back from God. It doesn't mean that we don't have things that make us feel less than or overwhelmed or like we are weighed down by something that's destroying us inside. We may not call it demonic and we should refrain from calling people "demons," but that doesn't make Bible stories about exorcisms irrelevant. Not believing in demons doesn't mean there's magically no evil or suffering in our lives or in our world. However we understand the concept, stories about demons and Jesus exorcising them is about healing and transformation.

So hear now the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus doesn't leave us alone to deal with our demons, however we define them. Jesus stays with us and trusting in him leads to transformation and new life. Jesus looks our demons square in the face, telling them to be

quiet and come out of us. Jesus silences those parts of us, or those outside things we are trying to overcome, that hold us back from God. Jesus never leaves us alone in the shadows, not when we are baptized and beloved and belong, body and soul, to God. "I am baptized. Take that, ya haters!" And thanks be to God for that. Amen.

[1] Mark 1:24-25

[2] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, 138-139.

[3] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*, 141.

[4] Fred Craddock as quoted by Kathryn Matthew Huey, UCC Sermon Seeds for February 1, 2015 (Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B) http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_february_1_2015