

Unclean Spirits
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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Mark 1:21-28

When was the last time you all had an exorcism here at Pilgrim? Yes, an exorcism in the service. You see I'm still trying to get all the history straight and I thought I would put it on the timeline during the after church discussion. So, last time you cast out a demon during worship? Last time there was a healing of unclean spirits?....

For those of you old enough and brave enough to have watched the classic horror movie *The Exorcist*, you are probably imagining an exorcism that involves lots of gore and heads spinning around in circles. That image has become the definitive illustration of exorcism in our culture.

But that's not what we see Jesus doing today. Nor is it what we are asked to do either.

So how do we exorcise unclean spirits? What would that mean here at Pilgrim?

First, let's look at the text. Jesus and the disciples enter Capernaum. Capernaum was a crossroad of primary importance, being along the Beth-shan -- Damascus highway; it was unlike Nazareth, a mountainous and isolated hamlet. But, Capernaum was also sufficiently apart from the big centers and especially from Herod's capital that Jesus was able to teach and preach without getting into trouble right away. The population of Capernaum was diverse: fishermen, farmers, artisans, merchants, publicans etc. Jesus chose many of his apostles from this community either among fishermen or publicans. (textweek.com)

Upon entering Capernaum, Jesus goes to the temple and begins teaching. And then, in the midst of this, he heals a man afflicted by unclean spirits. In these beginning stories in the gospel of Mark, Jesus' teaching and healing are wrapped up together, one interrupting the other. There is always the tension with the scribes and other religious leaders lingering in the background.

Jesus begins to teach and "[the people] were astounded by his teaching for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Jesus teaches in a new way. How? Usually the scribes would speak the words of God but Jesus speaks and then teaches with authority as to what they meant. And that was different and not necessarily welcome. Especially if you were a scribe used to having prestige.

A man in the temple comes over and demand Jesus, what have you to do with us?

Now again, we probably have an image in our mind that this is some disheveled, homeless, or mentally ill individual barging in and making a scene. "Just get rid of him," the folks probably thought. Just as we might usher out someone making a scene.

But this is a man from the synagogue, familiar with it. And he is the one asking the question, "what have you to do with us?" So, it is quite possible that this man is someone quite different than we imagine. Someone actually in power. Someone like a church Council member or the pastor, or the youth leader, or a founding member.

"Have you come to destroy us?" the man demands.

The text does not say the man has a demon. It says he has an unclean spirit. He is possessed. What does it mean to be possessed? What possesses us? What possesses me? What possesses you?

- Addition, alcoholism, serial infidelity can possess us
- Talking about people to others rather than to one another
- Perfectionism, the safe alternative to risk
- Workaholism where we work and work and work and push away other needs and obligations

What unclean spirit lives in us, possesses us?

The great Russian novelist and ardent Orthodox Christian Alexander Solzhenitzen said something to the effect that, “the line between good and evil does not go between countries or empires or religions or political systems. The line between good and evil goes right down the middle of every human heart.”

Jesus comes to remove the unclean spirits from all of us, to move that line that goes down the middle of our hearts.

It is so much easier to think that Jesus heals a man with epilepsy who desperately walks into the synagogue wanting to be healed. Or that the demons within him are cast down to hell by Jesus’ mighty word.

But that does the text, and us, a disservice. Because the people who need healing, the people with unclean spirits, are us.

We are spending time right now at Pilgrim thinking about our history as a congregation and that includes looking at the conflict that has occurred here at Pilgrim both in the near past and along our 60 plus years of history. Conflict that has consumed this church at different points in our past. Conflict that showed a unclean spirit in us, in our relationships with each other, in our handling of difference and disagreement.

How we handle conflict shows a lot about what lies within us, our mix of light and dark, of compassion and unclean spirits. Do we talk to each other or about each other?

Talking about possession, about unclean spirits, may bring up natural resistance in us. “Not me,” we say. “I don’t have a problem. Not me. And why are you bringing all that stuff up anyway, pastor. Doesn’t it just drag us down? Especially when things were just getting good again around here...”

Yes, but what happens the next time we bump into disagreement or difference? What then? Do we know how to bring our best selves, a clean spirit to that, and will we want to?

You see whenever Jesus heals people in the Bible, whether of illness or casting out demons, he is not just healing individuals when he casts out demons, or when he heals the sick. He is restoring communities. Jesus seeks always to restore the social wholeness denied to the sick/impure by their culture. Those who were ill or suffered from demons were dehumanized in Jesus’ time.

When we look honestly at how we are as a church, who we welcome and how we talk to each other, and how we decide who belongs and who does not, we come face to face with what the social wholeness looks like here at Pilgrim.

- Are we a restoring community?
- Do we look conflict in the eye and sit down to listen to one another?

- What happens when people behave badly?
- And how do we reconcile with one another?
- How do we heal the unclean spirits within us?

Janet Hunt, a pastor, writes about this. She says:

More than once in my life I have been party to conflict where in its wake I was unwilling to let it go. I would continue to poke at the bruise to help me remember the injustice I experienced. I would keep looking for evidence to confirm my negative opinion of the offending party. Oh yes, I would, in fact, take some measure of satisfaction in my honestly earned anger or resentment. After a time I would no longer always be able to remember what had hurt me in the first place, but I knew I had been wounded and I was not quick to move on. Oh yes, I was, in fact, 'possessed.'

Perhaps I clung to those long held grudges because they were familiar. Or maybe because I felt somehow that I 'looked better' in comparison to the other as I told the story again. Or maybe because letting them go would have meant letting go of part of what I had become. No, I am not 'possessed' by an unclean spirit, but I have known myself to be possessed by a great deal which would keep me from embracing all God intends for me. (dancingwiththeword.com)

We are in the liturgical season of Epiphany where we talk about light: the light of Christ, the light spreading out into the world. Maybe discerning what is clean or unclean within us is thinking about what we are willing to lay out in the light for all the world to see. If how I act or what I say I would not want out in the light, perhaps I should question whether it is indeed clean.

This is not an easy topic. The more we talk about this the more uncomfortable it gets. What do we do with our unclean spirits within us? And how can we learn a new way here in this place, the church where we preach healing and wholeness and repentance, a turning back to what is good and full of light?

The man today was healed of his unclean spirit. I don't know if he wanted to be or not. He certainly hollered about it. What are you doing here Jesus? What the heck are you about in this place? (I imagine Jesus quietly answering "to bring about the kingdom of God.")

And when I honestly look within myself, do I want to be healed of my unclean spirits? My nursing of grudges, the deliciousness of a few gossipy words, the always knowing I am right and the need to prove it. What are you doing in me Jesus, what are you about inside of me? (I imagine Jesus quietly answering: "to bring about the kingdom of God.")

Do I want to be healed? Do you?

Once in a monastery two monks walked about doing their morning duties. As they passed a small bowl, filled with rain, they saw a scorpion was drowning in the water. One monk reached in to save the creature. As soon as his fingers touched the panicking Scorpion, it stung him and the monk dropped the Scorpion back into the water. The monk sighed, and reached back in. This time he got his grip a little firmer, but still dropped the Scorpion when he was stung. He kept reaching in, as his friend looked on in confusion.

After dozens of attempts, the other monk spoke up saying "Brother, why do you keep trying to save that scorpion? It stings you every time you come near it. The monk paused before reaching in again and smiled. As another sting bit into his hand, he took a fallen leaf from the ground and pulled the scorpion out to safety. He finally said: "Because it is his nature to sting, and my nature to save. Don't forget brother, soon either I'll stop feeling the pain of the sting

and he will be saved, or he will stop being afraid and be saved.' Compassion cannot be stopped so easily.'
(buddhistreflections.blogspot.com/2011/01/monk-and-scorpion)

If the scorpion can be saved, so can you. So can we.
If the man with the unclean spirit can be healed, so can you . So can we.

But do I want to? And am I willing to let go and follow the path of Jesus and the hard work it takes to get there?

- to let go of being right
- to resist talking about someone and rather talk with them
- to forgive and forgive again.

Do I want to let those unclean spirits go?

Do we as Pilgrim church want to be healed?

- To let go of old hurts and forgive
- To talk with compassion to one another, and not talk about one another
- To see that there are so many ways to do ministry and be the church, not just one, not just ours
- To reach out into the community to find the broken and the bruised and the despairing and invite them here, those who may be so different than we are or different than we expected
- To hold together when times are tough and face conflict together with respect and honesty
- To lean on God and one another

Do we want to be healed? Do you?

May Jesus guide us with transforming love. Amen.