

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany (B/RCL)
January 29, 2006
Mark 1.21-28
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

So – **why** was there an unclean spirit in the synagogue the day Jesus showed up?? Had it heard about Jesus' presence in the neighborhood and decided to lay in wait for Him? My guess is “No,” since it was distressed to see Him and intuitively asked, “Have you come to destroy us?” (Mark 1.24) An intentional showdown would have been dumb, because the unclean spirit realized what no one else in the building did, that this is “the Holy One of God” (Mk. 1.24c). This Jesus was destined to win any and every battle with the forces of evil. We're still left with the question, then: **why** was there an unclean spirit in the synagogue the day Jesus showed up?? How'd it **get** there??

St. Mark says, “Just then there was in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit....” (v. 23) There's our answer, at least in part. The spirit entered **in a man**. I'm not sure, but I'm wondering if the **un**possessed part of the man had come to worship God, just like everybody else had. Then the unclean spirit within him got the upper hand when it recognized that “the Holy One of God” was in close proximity, sort of like a Geiger counter going off when something radioactive approaches. It's ironic, isn't it, that the unclean spirit recognized Jesus' holiness before any of the faithful synagogue-goers did?

I've always approached this story as the telling of something that happened once, a long time ago, and that hasn't been repeated since Jesus' death and resurrection. But in reading this passage with fresh eyes and open heart this past week, I realized that the Holy Trinity sanctuary isn't all that different from the Capernaum synagogue. Unclean

spirits enter in the people who arrive here to worship, too. They hitch a ride in you and in me. They come in like burrs on our socks or animal hair on our coats.

Obviously I don't mean that any of us needs to be the subject of a Hollywood-style exorcism. The unclean spirits I'm talking about don't throw us to the ground, don't make us foam at the mouth or bark. Parts of us are "possessed" instead by unholy attachments to things that separate us from God, preoccupation with activities or people that aren't part of God's plan for us, and that make **us** cry out with the unclean spirit, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" In other words, "What are You doing butting into our business??" "Who asked You to be a killjoy?" "Who invited You, anyway?"

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" **How** did You get the false impression that we care **what** You think about the lives we live in between worship services? Of course I'm a Christian, but the world of business is cutthroat and in order to stay in the game I have to give as good as I get.... Of course I've been taught something different, but if I don't talk the way my friends do, they'll think I'm a holy roller. Of course I believe there's just one God with a capital "G", so what do you mean I've made pot, cocaine, porn into little gods? Can't You just leave me alone and let me live my life?? "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

Exorcism is a form of healing. But a difference between exorcisms and physical healings is that often the people whom Jesus healed **asked** to be healed. The blind men cried out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" (Matthew 9.27) The official from Capernaum pleaded, "Sir, come down before my little boy dies" (John 4.49). The ten

lepers implored, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (Luke 17.13) The woman with the hemorrhage boldly reached out to touch the hem of his cloak.... (Matthew 9.20)

By contrast, there is no instance in Scripture of an unclean spirit **asking** to be cast out. The people who are “possessed” are helpless to seek out healing for themselves. Jesus doesn’t piggyback on **their** faith to heal them. He simply and singlehandedly steps into the fray and casts out the death-dealing spirit that is destroying them. Sometimes loved ones approach Jesus on behalf of those overtaken by unclean spirits, like the father of the possessed boy who threw himself into the fire and into the water.... (Mk. 9.21-22) or the Canaanite woman who pleaded for “crumbs” of healing for her tormented daughter (Matthew 15.27).

Sometimes we, too, pray on behalf of loved ones who don’t recognize their own sickness and who seem powerless to mobilize resources for their own healing. Like Monica, St. Augustine’s mother, we are on the outside looking in, seeing the devastation in the lives of loved ones and asking God to open their eyes to their dis-ease, their spiritual sickness, and to the need for change. We intercede for them that God may open their hearts to the possibility of hope.

When change for the better actually happens, but gradually, we’re less apt to attribute it to grace, less apt to credit God’s love and power with the transformation we see before us. When it is lightning quick or radical, we’re more apt to turn to heaven as an explanation. John Newton was an English seacaptain possessed by an unclean spirit of greed that made him willing to traffic in human slavery in order to make a living. He then drank heavily in order to quiet the conscience that kept him awake at night. God eventually exorcised those evil spirits within him. The hymn he wrote, “Amazing

Grace,” is lasting testimony to his gratitude to a gracious God. “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” His recovery was sure but not swift. He moved from darkness to light **in stages**, as most of us are apt to do.

Saul, a Pharisee who proudly persecuted Christians in the early church, was exorcised of his spirit of self-righteousness more dramatically when he was struck blind on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Mary Magdalene was inhabited by seven unclean spirits before Jesus cast them out. Neither of them asked to be relieved of their unholy burdens, any more than John Newton had. But after Jesus took the initiative to clean their spiritual houses, they also lived lives of profound gratitude.

Psalm 40, verses 2 and 3 say:

He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.

May it be so for us and for those whom we love. May every unclean spirit within us flee before the Holy Spirit of God, at the name of Jesus and to the glory of God the Father.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson