

Casting Out the Demons

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Mark 1:21-28

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Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems to me that we are pretty comfortable talking about Jesus the healer, or Jesus the justice seeker, or Jesus the mercyman, Jesus the champion of nonviolence, and maybe even Jesus the Savior. But we don't talk much about Jesus the Exorcist. And yet, the Gospel of Mark sure does. It comes up many more times before the Markan version of the Jesus story is over, and other Gospel writers also spin their own version of Jesus' exorcisms.

What are we—we post-modern-scientific-rational-make-sense-of-everything-reasonable people—supposed to do with that? Jesus calls out and orders around demons and unclean spirits with some degree of regularity. I never learned how to do that in Sunday school or seminary, but I sure could have used it a time or two.

Truth is, the older I get, and the more times I look in the mirror and try to make sense of myself and this world, the more I believe in demons. Friends, it's time you know if you didn't already—I'm possessed. If I may, I'd like to take a few moments to introduce you to some of my demons. Then you can go next.

The first one I like to call the Toilet Bowl Demon. When I'm cleaning a commode, I am often gripped with resentment and judgment toward those with whom I share my house. The demon takes over. "Why I am doing this again?" "It's not my turn." "What are they doing right now? Whatever it is, I'm sure it's not helpful." "They are just taking advantage of me." Maybe, before I figure out how to stand for peace in a nation fixated on violence, I need to figure out how to clean a bathroom and be able to love those whom I truly love at the same time.

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And then there is the Sun Demon, that unclean spirit that draws on the human-conditioned labels related to gender and race and education and class and sexuality and puts me smack dab at the center of the solar system, if not the universe. This one is a tricky little booger. For even when I am doing "good" and "redemptive" things, he will whisper lies like: "It all depends on you"; "You are the one to figure it out and fix it and your value as a human being depends on it."

And then there is the No-Free-Love Demon. He usually shows up in the middle of the night with proclamations like, "Don't stop earning affection and esteem, because as you soon as you do, all the people in your life will drop you like a hot potato. Grace and unconditional love is not how the real world works."

I believe in demons. I've seen them at work within me and in others who have invited me into their inner lives. I believe in the forces of hell that rise up from within us and work hard to keep us from seeing who we really are and who and what we are intimately connected to. Clearly, as we see in this story and so many others, Jesus, in part, was about naming and calling out this legion of personal demons that keep our hearts and souls from basking in the Light and Love of God.

In one sense, it would be easy to stop here. Our cultural stream of Christianity tends to flow toward keeping our faith in the confines of personal salvation. We could stop here and go home, continue to work on our issues, and believe that this is the Gospel Good News—that Jesus came to free me from my personal demons. I think he did, *and* I think Jesus knows—as have all mystics and prophets—that our personal journeys toward liberation are intimately tied to the liberation of all creation.

In our story today, Jesus' exorcism simultaneously frees a bound man and names the bound-ness of the social, religious, and political order. The people were amazed, because Jesus was teaching and acting with a true redemptive authority. Something they had not seen before.

The Scribes—the ones whose job it was to interpret the law for the people—had apparently fallen prey to the common trap of loving the law, of loving their own ideas, of loving being right more than loving

people. Jesus' teaching and exorcism in the synagogue on the Sabbath, on their very turf, is an obvious challenge. And given the Scribes' collusion with Rome, it's a challenge to the Empire as well.

In addition to exorcising a demon, who no doubt feasted on the trauma of the surrounding oppression, Jesus is proclaiming that the emperor and the Scribes have no clothes. His act proclaims: "The power you wield is false; it's a lie; you have no ultimate authority."

So here we are, many centuries later, and just like Jesus' disciples we are trying to align ourselves with this Jesus' authority. We come here because, at least on some level, we long to follow the true voices of authority within us and around us and not be duped again and again by the demons. And, I think it's important to recognize that we are attempting, as Dorothee Sölle says, to follow Jesus right in the middle of "pharaoh's household."

It's a tall order, I think. Unless you already find yourself outside of our Empire's delivery of security, the constant lullaby is powerful. The sleepiness it evokes can keep us dancing with the demons of division in a dream dressed up as heaven so as to disguise the realities of hell. And, it's an opportunity to embody another way at the epicenter of Pharaoh's way.

A few weeks ago, I had one of those dreams that woke me up in the middle of the night, and I couldn't go back to sleep. One of those dreams that slip past the demons guarding conscious awareness. It's something of a recurring dream for me.

I show up at a rehearsal dinner, only to find out that I am the groom. Kiran, my wife, and I are seated with the bride—my future wife—and her father. After many uncomfortable looks at Kiran, I very awkwardly try to explain to the bride and her father that I have made a mistake. I am already married. I begin to apologize for misleading them, but I simply cannot go through with this.

The bride begins to cry, and her father stands up with his fists balled up ready to punch me. I tell them that I am prepared to take responsibility for the mistake and let the guests know everything. At that point, I wake up sweating. When I shared this dream with my good friend Stan, he nodded, saying, "Yes, sounds like a dream of a divided heart."

One of the roots of the word *demon* is the verb "to divide." Maybe, in a simple way, that is the work of the demonic, at all its levels. It is to divide—to divide us from our true selves, to divide us from recognizing our deep interrelatedness to each other and creation, to keep us from recognizing the ways in which our hearts are divided.

And maybe, in a simple way, that is what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is all about. It announces that there is no division. It's a lie. What you do to others, you do to yourself, and vice versa. It's what Martin Luther King desperately wanted the well-meaning white pastors in Birmingham to understand: "We are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

So, what do we do? What do we do with the demons? I think, if Jesus is our guide, the response is obvious. We love the hell out of them. We recognize the wounds and fear from which they arise, we call them out, and we love the hell out of them. To reject or to hate or to fight the demons, within us and around us, only spawns more division. We name them, we call them out, and we love them.

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In the epistle for today, Paul is writing the church in Corinth, a community that struggled mightily with issues of status, elitism, and a hierarchy based on wealth and privilege. He writes, "Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by God." He adds the rejoinder, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Remember the Scribes, the ones who seemed to love knowledge, to love being right, more than loving people? You should know that that demon lives in me, too. I'm now calling it my Republican-Primary Demon.

It usually arises on my early-morning runs when, based on the arguments from the most recent debate, I imagine myself masterfully arguing the counter-point and putting them (usually Newt Gingrich) in their place. Besides the fact that I would be much more likely to forget the names of the three federal

departments than to deliver a debate-ending zinger, it reveals yet another force within me that feeds division and that needs the love of Jesus. I know I have some Scribe in me.

I recently took a trip to visit some friends in Winston-Salem. Unexpectedly, I ran into an old friend from college. He is pastoring a Presbyterian church that is quite public about its rejection of the idea that homosexuality can be compatible with Christian faith. Though knowing that I hold a different conviction, he wanted to tell me the story of how his church found a place to worship.

They, like Circle of Mercy, began meeting on Sunday evenings, in part with the hope that they could easily rent church space that was not being utilized at that time. They, like us, found that more difficult than they expected. Finally, my friend called up the pastor of Green Street United Methodist Church.

Green Street is one of the major congregations in Winston-Salem that publicly welcomes and blesses homosexuals as equal members of their community. After many hard conversations, which led to some church members leaving, Green Street began sharing their worship space with my friend's church. Without glossing over the pain and hurt involved in this story, I do hear some Good News. I hear the capacity to love people more than being right.

Gandhi said, "A nonviolent revolution is not a program of seizure of power; it is a program of transformation of relationships." This, I believe, captures the heart of the Jesus revolution. With eyes and hearts wide open, we see and name the false divisions that govern our world and our souls. And to the best of our ability, we tend to the cracks, armed with the restoring power of that Jesus love. May it be so. Amen.