

## January 28, 2018 – Unclean Spirits

Mark 1:21-28

When was the last time you came face-to-face with an unclean spirit, a demon? Could you see it? What did it look like? Did it resemble a teenage Linda Blair? Did it have pointy ears and a forked tail? Was it wearing a business suit and a striped tie or motorcycle leathers and an old bandana or possibly a turban or a hijab? What did it look like?

That's not even a fair question to ask, is it? Unclean spirits are just that... spirits. They don't have any shape or substance. They dwell inside other beings. They most often make their presence known by the way that they impact our hearts, our bodies and our minds. Whether we want to admit it, or not, they reside within each one of us.

Unclean spirits are those things that keep each of us from being who we were meant to be. They are the things within us that rob us of abundant life. Let's name a few (*wait for answers: addiction (drugs or alcohol, sex, power, gambling), greed, pride, fear/anxiety, depression, vanity, and anger*). Yes, many of those unclean spirits are also identified with sin because they act as a barrier between us and the sacred within us, between us and God. But others are more like an illness, something we have very little control over, something that may require the help of medical professionals. Whatever your demons may be, know that there are others around you struggling with the same inner issues.

I struggled with my own unclean spirits during my last semester at Emmanuel College. Despite doing well at school, and having a successful student internship, my mind was filled with voices telling me that I wasn't good enough. Every demon that had ever crossed my path on my way to ordination suddenly came back for a last stab at my confidence. All my insecurities, my fears, my anxieties returned ... it was as if they didn't want me to succeed. For a while I was paralyzed by these demons and was unable to complete my assignments. I am no different than any of you. We all struggle with unclean spirits.

But sometimes we forget that within each one of us there is both the sacred and the unclean. Especially when we are dealing with people who are different than we are, who have different ideas, politics, culture or even a different taste in music. It's easy to do. For example, those of you who are on the left side of the political spectrum, consider how you perceive people like President Donald Trump, or past Prime Minister, Stephen Harper. And those of you on the right of that same spectrum consider your feelings for people like Bernie Sanders, or anybody associated with the Green Party. Your feelings may range from believing them to be stupid or incompetent to thinking they are the devil incarnate. It's easy to demonize those people that we think are hurting us, those people that we do not agree with or do not understand. When, in fact, they are just people like you and me, dealing with their own personal demons.

In today's scripture passage the author was careful to make this distinction.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue and the people are "spellbound" by what he is saying. Suddenly a person with an unclean spirit appears and "it" shrieks at

Jesus. The translation that Shirley read this morning was very clear. The pronoun wasn't he or she, but it. The person didn't speak... it was the unclean spirit that spoke to Jesus saying, "What do you want from us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!"

First of all, let's comment on the fact that it was the unclean spirit that was able to recognize Jesus for who he was. The leaders of the synagogue, his own disciples, struggled to figure out his identity, but this unclean spirit recognized Jesus right away. I believe that it was the Holy Spirit in Jesus that the demons recognized. And they knew that the spirit of unconditional love and compassion that filled Jesus was their enemy. It was the only thing with the power to destroy them.

Then Jesus rebuked the spirit, telling it to come out of the person. At that the unclean spirit convulsed the possessed one violently, and with a loud shriek it came out. The good news is that it is possible to remove or at least to quiet those unclean spirits that reside within each one of us. It may not be easy, it may not be pretty but the power exists and that power comes from God. It comes from that sacred place that is also within each one of us. It is the power of love and mercy.

We are able to quiet those voices within us when we realize that we are not alone. When we realize that the Holy Mystery is always present. Sometimes, when those demons take over our bodies and our minds, God appears to us in other people: in the neighbor who knocks on the door; in the family member or

friend who sends a text or email; or in the stranger who smiles at us and remarks on the beauty of the day when we have been unable to see the sun.

When unclean spirits haunted me during my last semester at school, the Holy Spirit led me to the people in my life that I trusted: a woman who knew me deeply and was able to name the demons for me; a mentor who assured me that my skills were good enough and my faith was deep enough; and a mother who fed me while I spent several days finishing the papers that I needed to write. God's love and compassion appears in many forms to help us exorcise the demons within us.

So the good news is that we can, with God's help, quiet the unclean spirits and live abundant lives, the lives that we were meant to live. And the even better news is that we are all God's beloved children. We are loved even with our unclean spirits, even with all those flaws that may seem to make us unlovable. God loves even those that we would name as our enemies. Imperfect as we are, we are all beautiful in God's sight.