

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried 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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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Jennifer and I spent the better part of a day with my mother-in-law in an emergency room in Aberdeen last Wednesday. We got the situation stabilized and then waited. Like you do. And so, after a couple of hours, my mind started to wander. Great nursing staff, I thought, but they are a little behind the times.

Still, the Aberdeen ER gave fantastic care compared to the state of health care in first century Palestine. Back then, people who were chronically sick were forced to live in isolation on the margins of a village, outside the protective walls of a city.

While I was lost in pondering ancient history, the police brought a man into the room next to ours. He was clearly having some kind of psychotic break. With some medical intervention and calm counseling, the staff helped him to relax and begin to return to himself. What a stark difference, I thought, between the medical care that we expect now and the treatment people got in the ancient Mediterranean.

Thankfully, we don’t tend to treat people with epilepsy, bipolar disorders or mental illnesses as though they are possessed by demons. That’s a huge advance in the way we treat each other. What we have lost in the process is our ability to make sense of the notion of “unclean spirits.”

Something important is clearly happening with the man in Mark’s story. Something is holding this man hostage. He is in the synagogue for now, but having allowed the unclean spirit to speak, he is likely to be ejected from the

community. Those who love him will be deeply upset, but that was the custom that people considered decent and proper.

This story must be essential for Mark's Jesus because it is the first act of his public ministry. After John baptized Jesus, the Spirit cast Jesus out into the desert to be tempted by the Accuser. In Luke and Matthew's telling, we hear what happened during those 40 days. Mark doesn't provide those details and, instead, has Jesus going to Galilee where he enlists four fishermen brothers to join his cause.

The five of them enter Capernaum and when the Sabbath comes, Jesus begins to teach. Only now does Mark reveal what happened in the desert. In the passage just before this reading, Jesus *told* us: "The proper time has come and the Kingdom of God is near. Change your hearts and trust in the good news."

In this reading, he *shows* us that declaration in action. He liberates a man from an unclean spirit that is depriving him of his well-being, separating him from his family and community, and draining his life of the joy and purpose that God intends for all people.

Here in the synagogue, the primary teaching institution for first century Jews, Jesus displays the personal authority that God has granted. The scribes, the teachers of Torah, tended to rely on referred authority. They quoted scripture or teachers with phrases like: "...as Hillel the Elder has said..."

Instead, Mark's Jesus amazes the congregation by displaying his own authority – authority that came not from humans, but directly from God. Then, having successfully overcome the Accuser in the desert, he casts out an unclean spirit. Jesus shows us the outcome of a Kosmic struggle as it plays out within one man in the midst of a trusting human community.

And with that demonstration, Jesus shows that, without hesitation and without conditions, God is willing, eager and committed to liberate any one of us. And when I say any one of us, I don't mean for any one of us Episcopalians or any of us Christians or "us" as in anyone who thinks or acts or looks like us. God is ready and prepared to liberate every one of God's children from whatever depletes the abundance of life that God desires for all of creation.

God is prepared to liberate all of God's children from anything that empties the human heart of hope for a better future. To free us from anything that allows us to deprive our neighbors of life-affirming hope. To unbind us from anything that causes us to demonize other people.

Addictions. Racism. Joblessness. Life-threatening work. Power abuses. Homelessness. Greed. Any personal, social, religious, economic or political force that diminishes, wounds or destroys human life.

God is prepared to liberate *all* of God's children from *any* unclean spirit that prevents us from changing our hearts; any impure spirit that keeps us from trusting that the proper time has come and that God's realm is near to all of God's children.

We have made great strides in medicine and psychology. And now, we can revisit the ancient world that was much more attuned to the workings of impure spirits. Without the distraction of Hollywood versions of demonic possession, this Gospel story exposes the far more routine way that impure spirits inhabit and inhibit our hearts and minds and communities.

The key for us is in the three things that the impure spirit shrieks at Jesus.

First, the impure spirit screams a question: "What is there between us and you, Jesus of Nazareth?" Resistance. The impure spirit recognizes the authority God has given Jesus and is trying to refuse that authority. Listening to Jesus' teaching, the spirit realizes the truth that Jesus is presenting and wants to reject it quickly.

By asking this question, the spirit relies on the customary behavior of the community. People generally stayed away from impurities that might be contagious. The question warns Jesus to leave well enough alone and let the torment continue. "This does not concern you. What is there between us and you?"

Then, before Jesus can respond, the impure spirit makes a shift, shouting a different concern: "Did you come to destroy us?" Fear. The authority of Jesus' teaching has already convicted the spirit. There *is* something between them and the spirit is suddenly aware of its own vulnerability. There's a change coming. The way things have been is not how

they should be, and now the impure spirit is aware that loss will surely be a part of the change, possibly even death.

And so, again, before Jesus can respond, the impure spirit makes one last stab. Instead of a question, the next move is an incantation: “I recognize you, who you are, the holy one of God.”

Control. Or at least an attempt at control.

You see the ancient world was filled with spirits, both malicious and virtuous. And there were prescribed ways to interact with them. One way to protect yourself from the power of spirits, according to ancient practices, was to call out the spirit’s name and true identity. And so, by shouting out Jesus’ name and the identity that God revealed when John baptized Jesus, the impure spirit hopes to block Jesus’ power and authority.

The spell has no effect. Jesus is not controlled or intimidated. He acts with power far stronger than the spirit’s and commands the spirit to come out. It’s *that* strange new behavior that amazes the people. They are astonished not by an unclean spirit and a possessed man, but by Jesus acting without regard for purity boundaries.

Confronted with liberation and healing, the unclean spirit has only one hope to continue stealing joy and meaning from this man. It must try to block God’s transforming power by relying on the existing order of things.

Undaunted, Jesus silences the spirit and drives it out of the man and out of the community. That action opens space for the restoration of humanity in both the man and the community. The spirit leaves, not willingly, but convulsing and screaming. The spirit has not been persuaded, it has been overpowered.

Maybe you recognize this pattern of resistance to uncomfortable truth, fear of change and the impulse to control. The pattern is rampant in our national debates on systemic racism and immigration; in our response to women’s workplace experiences and in our interreligious relations.

There are impure energies, spirits, if you will, holding our best selves hostage.

We do not have to resist looking into our own hearts. We don’t have to give in to fear, allowing it to stop dialogue or to stop right action. We don’t

need to demonize each other, and we cannot deny or ignore the impure spirits that are alive in our communities and draining us of God's peace even now.

If we are going to let Christ cast out the impure spirits within us, we have to see every person as one of God's children. Even those we don't agree with were created in the image of God. We have to remember, always, that God wants to liberate every last one of God's children.

There is no need to resist or fear God's influence changing our hearts.

There is, however, ample reason to trust. We can consent to God's liberating power and welcome God's transformative control. The Holy Spirit who bestowed authority upon Jesus will drive out those lesser spirits that capture God's children and will reconcile the separations they have caused.

This is the amazing teaching that Jesus gave us. The proper time to hear it has come once again.

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