

Mark 1:21-28

January 28 2018 The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

*when the demons flee*

Roy W. Howard

I have a friend who said to me: *I prayed to go to hell because it had to be better than the miserable condition I was in, and heaven seemed out of the question.* Then he began describing what it was like being gripped by an addiction so fierce and unrelenting that it left his life in bitter ruins and eventually whimpering for hell, like a beaten dog. Since he was neither in hell nor in misery – but actually alive and healthy – I asked him the obvious question: what happened? He said with shocking simplicity: **Jesus**. Not meaning to be irreverent, I said, Jesus? How?

Then he explained to me that once he knew he was not going to escape his addiction by immediately sent to hell, he grasped the only thing he knew to do; and that was to turn to the only source left, the one of his distant childhood. He prayed to Jesus – not to a distant God abstract and all knowing – but to Jesus whom he knew from the children’s song, *Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so*. And along with that prayer, he started reading the Bible, specifically the stories of Jesus, like the one I shared this morning. It all split his heart open; he spent days weeping in torment, on the edge of nothingness and life – then eventually he got up enough strength to go to a meeting, with his tiny New Testament, in his pocket. That step led to another and then another and another until he walked back into a community of faith and his continued recovery. He told me all of this after he said the simple shocking thing: **Jesus**.

We don’t quite know what to do with stories like this, any more than we know what to do with unclean spirits or demonic possession. I think we spend too much time trying to explain it or, worse, explain it away as a relic of a superstitious people and a magical prophet. Neither of which proved to be true for my friend. If you asked him if he was in the grip of a power over which he had lost all control, he wouldn’t hesitate to say yes. If you asked him did the word of Jesus deliver him from his misery, again he would say yes without embarrassment; and like Bill Nye, the science guy, he has a master’s degree.

It’s ironic that the only one who recognizes Jesus – as the Holy One - is the unclean spirit who cries in panic because Jesus has come to destroy him and render him powerless to wreak havoc on human life. We shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that this rude interruption occurs during a regular study of the scripture in the synagogue where Jesus as the guest teacher. One gets the impression that the unclean spirit is listening in on Jesus’ teaching and suddenly knows that he will be destroyed by the power of it. The others only know that the teaching of Jesus is astonishingly different from all the others because it has **authority**. The Greek word here for authority is **exousia**, which means **power**. Jesus’ teaching is distinguished because it has the power to bring forth obedience and change lives.

What's also important to hear is that the demons with which we struggle don't define who you are. You are the beloved. The demons – whatever you wish to call the forces that undermine you, fill you with unrelenting shame – can be cast out through the power of God's Spirit who is the Spirit of Christ.

Imagine this: Jesus has power over your shame, authority over what diminishes or leads you astray, power to cast it out, to restore you to yourself, to set you free. This is the good news!

Back to my friend: is it fair to say he was in the grip of an unclean spirit? I think so, but of course you might disagree. An unclean spirit is a force whose purpose is to destroy human life. We miss the point if we think of demons as little creatures with horns and scary faces, aliens bursting out Sigourney Weavers' chest. A demonic force is whatever is arrayed against Jesus and his proclamation of the reign of God. These demonic forces, unclean spirits, are deadly dangerous; their only purpose is to destroy, defame and disfigure human life as intended by God and made present in Jesus. They wreak havoc on people and communities in their grip. Jesus' teaching – persistently proclaimed and courageously lived by a people – will disrupt, dismantle and ultimately destroy the unclean spirits and bring freedom to those held in their grip. That is the testimony of my friend who was delivered from his addiction.

Yes, I know that demonic powers have not all been destroyed; they still are wreaking havoc on human lives and mocking the glory of God. The poet Wendell Berry describes racism as a **wound** afflicting white and black people. While I don't doubt it is a terrible wound; I would describe it as a *demonic force* arrayed against the word of Jesus that keeps rising from the cesspools of evil to destroy human community. I have no illusion that the exorcism of such demonic forces that destroy human life occurs in an instant just by saying Jesus, like abracadabra. It may be generations before one sees the fullness of freedom. *And Yet,*

we have a great cloud of witnesses that tell us the power of Jesus' word, proclaimed and lived, is mighty to save and will banish unclean spirits to their grave. The remaining question is whether you and I will hear the power of Jesus' teaching and take the risk to open our lives to him.