

“Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.” (Mark 1:23-26) A man possessed. A teacher who performs an exorcism. Reading and hearing stories like this as a teen and young adult, were part of the reason I questioned being a Christian. I thought “surely this story is made up right? I mean demons?” I looked around my 20<sup>th</sup> century reality and nothing pointed to the existence of such things. It would be easy to dismiss this story as nonsense given our modern understanding of the world. But to do so would miss the meaning of the story.

A large part of the ancient world believed in spirits of all kinds – good and bad. Our ancestors of faith believed that these spirits were more powerful than human beings but not as powerful as God. Biblical scholar John J. Pilch writes that in the modern world we have more control over our lives and circumstances than the ancient people believed they did.<sup>1</sup> For the ancient hearers of this story, they wouldn’t have batted an eye at the idea that a man was possessed by an evil spirit. Regardless of whether or not demon possession was real or if this man was suffering from something else that caused him to behave as if he was possessed, the real power of this story lies in the truth that Jesus healed him.

Not only did Jesus heal him, but he did so right in the middle of teaching in the synagogue. The text says that Jesus and his brand new disciples came to Capernaum and he began teaching in the synagogue. The people who were gathered were amazed by the authority and power Jesus had. Jesus, the lowly carpenter from the backwater town of Nazareth, was teaching with more authority and power than the Jewish legal scholars. I’m pretty sure that Jesus could tell he was connecting with the people listening. I know when I preach, I can usually tell if a sermon I am preaching is

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 30.

resonating for people or if it is missing the mark completely. As a human, Jesus may have been feeling pretty good about how well his message was being received.

But then this possessed man interrupts him. And in that moment, Jesus goes from preaching to doing. No longer just talking about the powerfully transforming love of God, he demonstrates it. I wonder if Jesus was at first frustrated by the interruption. I wonder if he was tempted to have the disciples escort the man out of the synagogue so we would not longer be a distraction to the message Jesus was delivering. This incident does occur really early in Jesus' ministry. According to Mark's gospel, it is the first time Jesus is teaching a group of people. I wonder if he was at all nervous about how people would react to his first sermon. This interruption could have been the last thing Jesus wanted. But Jesus doesn't seem to hesitate for a second about how to respond. He immediately silences the unclean spirit and demands that it come out of the man at once. The man is healed, right in the middle of church.

It might be difficult for us to relate to being possessed by an unclean or impure spirit. And yet a colleague of mine pointed out, we are a society obsessed with cleanliness.<sup>2</sup> He had an experience of going to his local grocery store with a visitor from a rural area of another country. They walked up one aisle filled with laundry detergent, dishwasher detergent, floor cleaner, window cleaner, dusting spray, sprays for the air, bleach filled surface wipes, mops, sponges, towels, cleaners for tubs and showers, cleaners for toilets, and the list goes on. But then they walked down another aisle filled with shampoos for all sorts of hair types and conditions, body scrubs, body washes, soaps in bars, soaps in bottles, bubble baths, hand sanitizer, antiperspirants, deodorants, body sprays, scented lotions, astringents, toners, facial cleansers for dry skin, for oily skin, and for "normal" skin, and again the list goes on. The visitor turned to his companion with a puzzled look and said "what is wrong with you people?"

My colleague reflected later that we are a society obsessed with cleanliness. We spend billions of dollars to make sure we don't smell or appear dirty in any way. I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with being clean, and my intention is in no way to

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Rolf Jacobson, Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, MN.

minimize the struggle that some people have with a fear of germs. But as a society at large, we at times treat being clean as a requirement for being treated with respect and we are willing to spend a lot of money to make sure we meet that requirement. But more importantly, this obsession goes beyond mere physical cleanliness. We are obsessed with making sure that no one knows the other ways in which we feel unclean or impure.

In some circles, admitting that you see a therapist is taboo. And yet according to 2004 poll by the American Psychiatric Association, 48 percent of those polled reported a visit to a mental health professional by someone in their household this year.<sup>3</sup> I've known people who stayed away from church when they feel like they don't have their life together. Either they lost a job, or were going through a personal crisis, or were experiencing shame around something else in their life and they were concerned about being judged by their fellow church members.

I invite you to consider if there things in your experience that make you feel spiritually dirty? Have you experienced some oppression or violation that makes you feel shame even though you did nothing wrong? Is there something that you carry with you, that you think if people knew about you, you would no longer be welcome? Are there places of brokenness or disappointment or fear in your life that makes you second guess if God really does love you? God does not stay away from us because of our challenges or shortcomings, or things we feel shame about, no matter what they are. Instead, God draws closest to us in these moments. As we heard in our scripture this morning, Jesus is willing to cross that boundary and declare that God claims us as God's beloved child not matter what. I want to invite you to share with me whatever that concern might be. You can send me a text or an email or talk to me in person, or you can write it on an index card and slip it under my door. I will pray for you and with you, I can meet with you to simply listen to your story or to help you work through something. Whatever you think you need. You are welcome to do this anonymously if you wish, but please know that regardless of what you share with me, unless it communicates a threat to yourself or others, I hold that in confidence and without judgment. If you are feeling

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug04/survey.aspx>

brave, you can share what you are carrying with our prayer circle by writing it on an index card and putting it in the offering basket. Again, you are more than welcome to do so anonymously. We will lift your concern up in prayer the next time we meet.

Now let's turn our attention outward. Are we paying attention to the brokenness we see in someone in our family or among our friends or at work or in the neighborhood. Might God be choosing to work through you to draw that person to new life. God is still at work casting out the unclean spirits of the world, and God is using us to continue the work of Jesus.

I noticed that even though the man is described as having an unclean spirit, he is still present in the synagogue. Jesus doesn't meet him outside the gates of the city or have to go to his home. He meets him in the synagogue and heals him right there. Are we willing to let people who are not perfect be among us to experience the healing and loving presence of God? Reflecting on this story, David Lose of Luther Seminary writes "Our God is a God of the broken, and our church is a fellowship of the needy. That's pretty much all it takes...to be a member of Jesus' disciples then or now: recognition of your deep need and trust that Jesus has come to meet it."<sup>4</sup>

We in the church have the opportunity to remind each other that God desires wholeness for us. God delights when we are healed of our brokenness. God wants us to be unburdened by anything that gets in the way of a full life or separates us from community. None of this is to say that the church should take the place of therapy or medicine. One of the blessings of living in these modern times is the gift of behavioral and medical science to help us heal. But the church has a role too. Community can be a powerful healer. We as the church have the potential to remind people of their belovedness and to welcome everyone, dirty or clean, into the embrace of this loving community.

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<sup>4</sup> David Lose, "Epiphany 4 B: First Things First," *Dear Working Preacher* (blog), January 26, 2015, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-4-b/>.