

Confronting Religious Demons

A sermon on Mark 1:21-28 by Nathan Nettleton, 28 January 2024

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Message

Jesus overcomes the demonic powers which colonise our religious structures and thinking and which rob us of our freedom, integrity and life.

Sermon

A few minutes ago, we heard a story about Jesus confronting an unclean spirit, or a demon, and I think it is probably fair to say that it is stories like this that make us most acutely aware of the massive gulf between our world view and the world view of the biblical writers and the people of Jesus's day. Mostly we have little or no idea what to do with such stories.

I very rarely have people telling me in any seriousness that they have been faced with an unclean spirit or demon. It is just not a category our culture is used to thinking in, so what are we to do when we come to a story like this? Well, let's take a look at it and see if we can make some useful sense of it. I think you might find it a whole lot more illuminating than you may have expected.

The first thing I want to note is a bit of a statement of the obvious, but it needs to be noted, and that is that these demonic spirits are in conflict with Jesus. This is pretty obvious in this particular story because the demon screams "Have you come to destroy us?" and then Jesus banishes it. But another little expression of it is less obvious but still worth noting.

In the subsequent stories about demons, the gospel writer Mark uses the words "demon" and "unclean spirit" interchangeably. It seems that they are just two names for the same thing. But here in this first story, he only describes it as an unclean spirit. And I suspect that the reason for that is that this story comes very soon after the story of the baptism of Jesus, and so we have this verbal contrast between the Holy Spirit and the unclean spirit.

And one of the things Mark is especially known for in the way he writes is the creation of story sandwiches where a story is sandwiched between the two halves of another story or between two clearly related images, and so the story in the middle is to be understood in light of what it is framed by.

In this case, we have this contrast between the Holy Spirit and the unclean spirit, and the only thing sandwiched in between them is the story of the calling of the first disciples. So what we have, right from the start, is the message that when we are called to follow Jesus, we are called to take sides in a conflict between two opposing kinds of spiritual powers.

The next thing I want you to note is the close relationship between this spiritual conflict and the teaching ministry of Jesus. Mark's gospel is the one that quotes the content of Jesus's teaching the least. It contains less parables than Matthew or Luke, no sermon on the mount, and none of the long teaching speeches that appear in John's account. And yet, Mark's is the gospel in which Jesus is most often titled "teacher", and over and over the crowds react to what he does by remarking on his teaching.

This story is a perfect example. I mean, look at it: if we had some big open manifestation of an evil spirit in here and it threw someone into a screaming fit and I rebuked it and cast it out, I don't think you'd all go home saying, "What do you make of this new teaching we heard from Nathan tonight?"

But over and over in Mark's gospel, Jesus casts out demons or heals the sick and the crowds respond by speaking excitedly about his teaching. Now part of the point here is that the healings and exorcisms are an enactment of the teaching and so do in fact point to the content of his teaching, but equally importantly and especially in the case of the confrontations with unclean spirits, it is the teaching that provokes the conflict.

The conflict is a conflict of teachings, and it is a conflict that is fought out by teaching. It is when people accept and buy into Jesus's teachings that things change, that people are healed and cleansed and set free. The teachings of Jesus are not just things to mentally believe in. They are things to respond to and own and live and be changed by. And thus they become a threat.

It is no accident that totalitarian regimes around the world are almost always involved in censorship of books, news and teaching materials. They need to limit what is taught, because if teaching opens the people's eyes, the regime will struggle to survive. That is exactly what is going on here. Jesus's teaching is undermining the existing teaching authorities, and there is a backlash.

When Jesus begins teaching the way of freedom and salvation, something actually happens. The people get excited but the opposition rises up in both spiritual and human forms. The demons scream and within a story or two, the Pharisees and the Herodians, who normally hated each other, are uniting in their mutual opposition to Jesus and planning together to kill him. We might not be given the text of Jesus's teaching, but when he teaches, things happen.

Now, the next thing I want us to take note of is the significance of where this takes place. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, and it is in the synagogue that this unclean spirit is lurking. And the significance of this is all the greater when you look at the overall sweep of the story of Jesus's public ministry in Mark's gospel, because it begins here with a cleansing in the synagogue, and it reaches its climax with a cleansing of the temple. After that, his fate is sealed.

So we again have this thing that Mark does of framing a whole lot of material with two related images, two cleansings or purgings: the casting out of an unclean spirit in the synagogue and the casting out of the things that defile the temple. And the first stirs up the first opposition to him, and the latter brings that opposition to its murderous resolve. And so what we are seeing tells us that the main places where Jesus identifies and confronts unclean spirits are the religious places. It's the temple, the synagogue, the church. If the church is the body of Christ, then this is Jesus dealing with the log in the eye of his own body.

Bring these three points together, and what have we got? The unclean or demonic powers are primarily encountered in the places of religious teaching and worship, and it is the teachings of Jesus that expose them and cause them to rise up in frenzied opposition to him. And this points us further into just what it was that Jesus was teaching and challenging.

This contrast between the clean or holy and the unclean or demonic is at the heart of what religious teachings and institutions claim for themselves. They are the places that determine and regulate who and what is considered holy and who and what is considered unclean, unacceptable, defiled and to be rejected. But when Jesus begins cleansing the “holy” places, you can quickly see that he is declaring that these “holy” places have in fact become havens for the demonic.

All the way through the history of religions, including Christianity, our supposedly “holy” systems have mutated into forceful systems of control. They claim control of people’s fates, they prescribe rules, they limit freedom, they judge who is clean and unclean and who can come in and belong and who can’t. They confine and stifle and squash and oppose. And Jesus doesn’t just speak against them. His critique of these stifling holiness systems is balanced by bold actions of liberation and renewal in God’s name. He makes it abundantly clear in word and deed that God’s love and mercy and joyous welcome will not be bound and regulated by our demonic religious systems.

So should we abandon the church because it is the place where the demonic forces find their most fertile soil and corrupt and oppose the truth and the pathways of freedom? It’s a pretty important question. We certainly need to be alert to the dangers but, no, I don’t think fleeing is the answer.

You see, the reason these places are the battle grounds is because they are also the place where truth and freedom are to be found. Out there on the soulless streets where people are merely warding off the despair with the constant pursuit of new possessions, new sensations, and new entertainments, the demonic forces have nothing to fear. They are not going to waste their energies where there is no threat of an outbreak of life and truth and freedom. But in here there is a danger – to them, but also from them.

The most demonic voices I’ve ever heard have been raised in churches. Almost the exact same things the unclean spirit said in this story have been heard in most churches at some time or another. “What have you to do with us, you liar? The church is being destroyed by these things you and your type are teaching. You come in here claiming to represent the Holy God, but we know who you are. You are an agent of evil, a blasphemer, a compromiser with evil. You and everyone who swallows what you say are going straight to hell.”

Most of us have heard those voices, and if we’re honest, most of us have been the mouthpiece for such voices at one time or another. Most of us have, somewhere along the line, felt so threatened by the radical news that God loves even those who seem most dangerous and despicable to us, that we have been gripped by the spirit of rejection and hostility and the need to control and oppose and expel.

And like this man in the story, we become fragmented and at war with ourselves; one part of us excited by the possibility of freedom, and something else within us clinging to our demons and our old rigid understandings of clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable.

But look at the wonderful news in this story. Not only is Jesus always on the side of freedom and truth and liberation, and not only does he have the authority to stand up to and banish these demonic forces that threaten to corrupt every religious truth, but he can distinguish

between these unclean spirits and we poor individuals who sometimes get ourselves in their grip.

You see, most of us in most of our churches, if someone starts spitting and snarling and opposing everything we try to teach or do or say, would expel the person who is in the grip of the demonic spirit. But Jesus doesn't see the person as an evil to be expelled. He sees the person as a beloved child of God to be saved and set free and forgiven and reconciled. And so Jesus can distinguish, standing up to the unclean spirit and banishing it, but stretching out the hand of welcome and mercy to the man himself.

And all the people were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority!" For that, my friends, is precisely the content of what Jesus was teaching: even if you have fallen way way down into the grip of addictive, controlling, possessing demonic forces that overpower you, and stifle you, and fragment you, and turn you into an angry, nasty, fearful, repressive, religiously intolerant, opponent of everything, God still loves you and is reaching out the hand of friendship to you and longs to set you free and welcome you back into the family of love and grace.