

Sermon: "Set Free" Text: Mark 5:1-20 July 19, 2020

Rev. Steve Clifton - Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON



A young man came to our church office on a weekday morning. He explained that he was not a religious person, not even spiritual really, insisted that he was a very rational person. But... he had bought a house in the neighborhood and... well... there was something off. Strange things were happening and the house did not feel right. So he came to us to see if, well...we might help remove whatever was in his new house that was doing things that disturbed him. In short he wanted us to cleanse his house of something malign. He wanted a sort of exorcism.

It is not uncommon for United Church ministers to perform house blessings. In the United Church service book there are prayers of blessing for homes and for the individual rooms that make up a house. We are happy to ask for God's blessing on a space. But what about removing something malign from a place? Our service book has no liturgy for something like that.

This man wanted us to chase the evil from his home. So what did we do...? We sent him down the road to a neighboring church where the priest was a trained exorcist.

In our tradition we are not so comfortable with the idea of malign spirits, not sure what to do with them. Like the young man who came to us looking for help we are pretty rational - We don't do exorcisms. We contract out.



In Marks Gospel Jesus exorcises a malign spirit. He travels across the Sea of Galilee to gentile territory and encounters a man condemned to life in a grave yard, “a man with an impure spirit” whom no one could control.

And Jesus tells the impure spirit to come out of the man. And the spirit, or spirits as their name was legion... a group of many... the malign presence was expelled. We feel sorry for the pigs in this story. But the man is restored to himself, is able to reclaim his place in his community.

In Mark, as in Matthew and Luke, Jesus exorcised demons from several people and Mark writes just a general comment that: <sup>31</sup> Whenever the impure spirits saw Jesus, they fell down before him and cried out, “You are the Son of God.”

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So what is an impure spirit? What is a demon? What does it mean to be possessed by something evil or malign?

Popular culture gives us cinematic images. Hollywood evil spits and screams and contorts. But the ancient understanding of demons was more subtle than that.

Perhaps the worldview of the ancients speaks of an impure spirit meaning what we might describe as mental illness, or a mood disorder. Perhaps Jesus healed the mind, the spirit as he did the body; in the world view of the Hebrew Scriptures mind, body and spirit are all one.

Perhaps as one Biblical scholar suggest, the ancients lived in a world where much was beyond their control, mysterious and unexplained, so the idea of evil spirits was used to explain the inexplicable, although pandemics and the collapse of economic systems, illnesses, including mental illness, all these things remind us that there is still much beyond our control.



There is another part of the ancient worldview that is worth exploring. A daemon (daemon is the Greek word from which our word demon comes from), a daemon in ancient thought was an idea, an image that dwelt inside of us, an idea of ourselves that may become who we are...

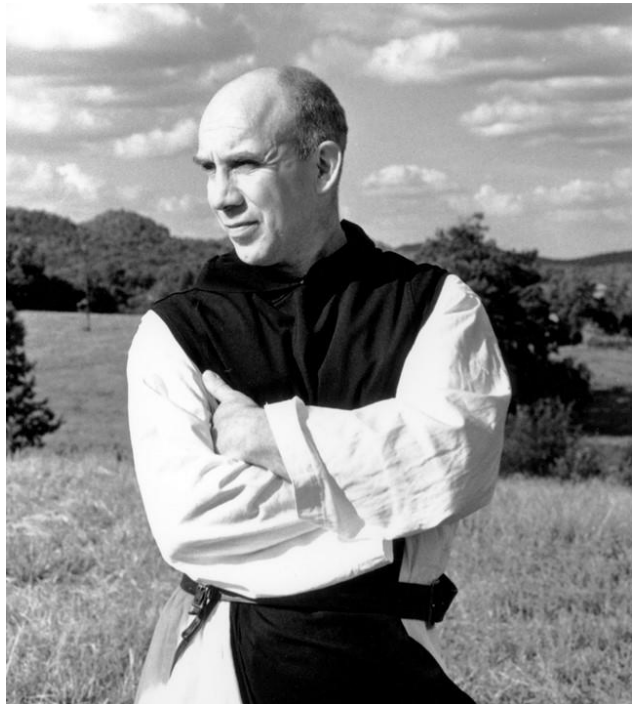
Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan speaks of how self-image can delude us. "A madman isn't just a beggar who thinks he is a King, he is also a King who thinks he is a King."

In the novel *Virtues of War*, author Steven Pressfield tells the story of Alexander the Great and uses the ancient understanding of daemons or demons in a way may that help us see the ancient wisdom, to understand the ancient language.

Alexander, a young prince from the Greek nation of Macedonia, led an army that conquered much of the ancient world. In fact the region of the Gerasenes where this gospel story of exorcism happens in Mark is located in a region established by Alexander. He came to rule over the great Empires of Persia and Egypt; his Empire encircled the Mediterranean and extended through Asia to India. He longed to rule from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific.

In the book, the author describes young Alexander as having a *daemon* within. Not a spitting twisted being inside, rather this demon was an idea, a powerful all-consuming idea. Alexander carried the idea of becoming a great conqueror, the greatest military commander of all time. This idea was planted in him while he was young, nurtured by the people around him. This idea of himself as a great general came to consume Alexander. And as his life progressed, this daemon, this idea of himself grew stronger and stronger until it possessed him entirely and drove him completely, at the expense of hundreds of thousands of lives lost in war.

The ancients thought of a demon as an idea, an image that could come to possess a person or a group.



You are made  
in the image  
of what you desire.

Thomas Merton

The great mystic and monk Thomas Merton wrote: “Your life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire. “

The bestselling author Eckhart Tolle in his book *The Power of Now* suggests that sometimes we can become possessed by our pain, by our woundedness; the hurts of our lives can collect in us until we identify completely with the pain and the wounds, and then the essence of ourselves becomes lost.

Or maybe we have been told who we are so often that we have to come to believe it is true. If we are lucky we are told good things in love. Sometimes we are told hurtful things by people we know or by society as a whole and we come to believe what those harsh voices have said of us...

A demon then, in the wisdom and language of the mystics, in the world view of our ancestors in faith, can be seen as a false image of ourselves, one that can take over and become who we are...

Collectively we can be possessed by an idea of who we are as a group. A collective may believe that they are a *nation chosen by God*. That they are the *master race*...

Or we can get an idea about what is normal, correct, acceptable and disparage those who don't conform to our collectives favored ideas about appearance, behavior, gender or belief, ... Nationalism, racism, tribalism, xenophobia... are these not products of our being possessed by shared ideas that comes to control us...ideas about who we are, what others are worth, about how things should be...?



What is a demon? How do we understand an impure spirit? That's a question that arises from our Gospel text today. But the question that the gospel of Mark is most interested is a different question. Mark's concern is "who is Jesus?"

Who is this man that malign spirits recognize and flee from?

Who is this rabbi who can speak to and heal the brokenness within us?

Who is this preacher who can set our spirits free from whatever binds them?

Who is this Holy one who can restore the outcast to their place in their community?

Who is this special one who can call us back to being God's beloved, to seeing all others as beloved of God?

In other ancient texts outside the Bible there are long stories of exorcisms and like Hollywood exorcisms, they are epic drawn out dramas, with lots of dialogue and negotiation and special effects. But the exorcisms Jesus performs in Mark are different. They are not negotiations between equals. Mark's exorcism stories are simple. Spare. Concise. In the story today Jesus just says "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!" and after a quick discussion about pigs it's all over. Jesus, Mark is telling us, is the one who has extraordinary and great power to heal and set free.

Who is this Jesus? Maybe Jesus is the One who sees through the false images and ideas we hold about ourselves and others, who recognizes the wounds and scars that we carry within, who sees the demons lurking inside. Jesus is the one who looks at us and through all of that and says "But you are not just that. You are more. You are a child of God. You are loved. Go home. You are free."

Amen