

Naming our Unclean Spirits - Sermon for January 31

Each Wednesday now, a few of us gather via Zoom for bible study and we've been using the readings for the following Sunday for our study. This week, as we read about Jesus' encounter with the man with the unclean spirit, we had a lively conversation about demon possession. Nothing like the strange, somewhat unexplainable mysteries of the spiritual life to get us curious and engaged.

Mark uses the term "unclean spirit" more often than any other author in the bible. It's also interesting to note that unclean spirit shows up once in the Hebrew scriptures, compared to 24 times in the Christian scriptures.

There is no getting around it, a significant part of Jesus ministry was the casting out of unclean spirits, or to put it in even more "religious" language - exorcism.

These encounters, though otherworldly to most of us today, still have much to teach us. For let us not be naive - our world is full of unclean spirits.

When Jesus commands the unclean spirit to be quiet it is because he does not want the unclean spirit naming him in front of others. In that time and culture, the one who named another was the one in authority - and the unclean spirit does not have authority over Jesus.

This is a significant moment and signifies to the reader or listener that God has "won", so to speak, through Jesus and the power or authority that evil forces may have been perceived as having is no longer. Jesus is the one now claiming that authority and ushering in the kingdom of God.

Twice the word for authority is used in this passage in relation to Jesus. People are astounded at his teaching - he speaks with authority and then when he commands the unclean spirit (which listens to him, obeys him), they are again impressed by his authority. His actions give credence to the authority he speaks with. And Mark is establishing, here at the beginning of his gospel, that Jesus is the one with the authority of God.

We don't tend to run around finding and naming demons in our midst, but like I said, our world is full of unclean spirits. And I would suggest that when we fail to name them, and with the authority of Jesus bid them to be silent, we actually allow them power over us, power in this world, power that is not theirs to have.

To quote Osvaldo Vena,

"Unless we name the demons, they will name us; they will control us and destroy us. But it takes courage to do so, for it will make us unpopular. Some will consider us apostates, negating the faith. I am not sure that we are willing to pay that price, as Jesus did."

What is an unclean spirit then, if we are to name them?

I would suggest anything and everything that pulls us away from the truth, the light, the love and the life of God. The lies that speak to us from inside - telling us we are not good enough, not lovable. The lies that speak to us from outside - telling us we are not of the right social group or educational level.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor, writes about her depression and naming it (and let me give you the heads up, Nadia is not your typical pastor and has a irreverent sense of humour)

Preaching about another passage referring to unclean spirits, Nadia said,

“And this week as I was feeling squirmy about people who talk of evil spirits and demons like they are beings in and of themselves, I remembered that at one point it felt so much like my depression was a character in my life, that it actually felt really good to just go ahead and give her a name.

I called her Francis...

Francis first stopped by in my teens and early 20s which was easily written off by my family as me being “moody”. But later, when I seemed to increasingly like the same things Francis liked: booze, emotionally unstable boyfriends, and self-destruction, she finally just moved in, ...

She was a terrible roommate. She kept the place filthy and always told me really devastating things about myself. For some reason, when she lived with me, I was no longer able to do simple things like shop for groceries. I’d stand for far too long looking at the dairy case, unable to make a decision about yogurt. She distracted me so much I would forget to eat ...my mother suggested I go talk to a nice lady about evicting her.

She’s a bit of a dope fiend, Francis, but it ends up there is one drug that she doesn’t like. It’s called Wellbutrin. Two weeks after I started taking it, she was gone.

But not for good. Now, 20 years later it still seems like she knows how to find me and sometimes she’ll show up, unannounced and stay a couple days even though I’m now into so many things she hates: sobriety, exercise, community, eating well – and of course, Jesus.”

What are the unclean spirits in your life that seem to have a voice that just won’t go away?

Is it the anxiety that tells you how unsafe you are and keeps you hidden?

Is it the whisper that you are not smart enough, don't know enough, that keeps you quiet?

Is it the hopelessness that there is nothing more to life than long quiet days alone that keeps you from looking out the window and into the light?

Is it the spirit of entitlement that tells you (and me and everyone else in our culture) that you deserve more and better, every convenience and opportunity - often at the cost of others?

Is it addiction that pulls you away from life, momentarily satisfying your despair, convincing you there is nothing better, nothing truly life giving?

Let me say, as someone who is very familiar with mental illness, unclean spirits do not equal mental illness. However, mental illness can be one of the ways these unclean spirits manifest in our lives.

Anyone who has had to deal with depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder or any other mental illness will know that 'naming' it is the first step. It is really really hard for us to admit that we are suffering. We still live in a culture, a world that is far more accepting of a broken leg than a broken mind or spirit.

But in this time of pandemic, mental health experts are telling us that we are in a time of crisis. We need to name the mental health struggles we are having, otherwise, we allow them to name us and have power in our lives.

So - start by naming the unclean spirits in your life (as tempting as it will be to name the unclean spirits in everyone else's life first...)

And then, turn towards the authority that is God, made known to us in Jesus.

To quote Osvaldo Vena again, who also quotes another scholar, Ched Myers,

Praying is not a pious resignation to God's will, or an exercise that puts our minds at ease, but rather, using Ched Myers' words,

"Praying is that "intensely personal struggle within each disciple, and among us collectively, to resist the despair and distractions that cause us to practice unbelief, to abandon or avoid the way of Jesus."3 In other words, it is the struggle to believe that change can really happen. A better world is possible."

So we start with prayer. We turn our hearts and spirits towards God. And, as Osvalda says, this is not pious resignation to God's will. This is a subversive act that undermines the power of evil in our world.

Prayer also activates and motivates God's people. It is often in those moments of prayer that we are most open to the Spirit of God leading and guiding us. An idea pops into our mind, a person to call, an action to take.

And we walk, with courage and with faith, onto the pathway that Christ has laid before us.

For some that will mean a visit to a doctor and possibly medication. We understand, unlike those at the time of Jesus, that underlying much of our anxiety and depression is the physiology of our brains, which can be helped by medication.

For others, the naming of the unclean spirit, will require a good friend or therapist or priest, who can listen and help us sort through the power that spirit has in our lives.

And for all of us, it will mean, giving more room and credence to the voice of Jesus - through scripture, worship, prayer - however we access it.

Let us be brave and name the unclean spirits in our midst, and then let us walk more fully into the light, life and love of God, which is our true path.

Amen.

If you are in crisis and need help, Durham Region Mental Health Services provides the following service for crisis counselling. Call 1-800-742-1890