

Rev. Adrienne Meier
January 31, 2021, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Spreading Wholeness

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

In the aftermath of the First World War, machine guns and bombs - our "improved" weapons of warfare - and better medical care meant more and more soldiers survived horrific injuries. It also meant more soldiers were horrifically disfigured. They'd survived, but bore shocking scars. As we were decades from wide-spread use of plastic surgery, many of them sought masks created by artists. These masks were likely an improvement of a sort when compared to what was hidden underneath, but with unblinking prosthetic eyes or a mouth whose expression never changed, the masks, too, likely repelled others. The masks were out of place on an everyday human face. Out of place things make us stare or avert our eyes. We cross the street, grow silent. We pretend as if it isn't there and disconnect from the realities of others. Not only do they have to live with whatever has repulsed us, but they also have to live without us. That is what is so striking about Jesus's interactions with what the Bible calls "unclean spirits." Jesus is not repelled by uncleanness, but overcomes it with wholeness.

Jesus must have preached a real hum-dinger of a sermon on that day in Capernaum. Being a preacher myself, and a bit of a Cubs fan, I might've compared it to a Rizzo grand slam on a windy day. The ball soars over the ivy and out, onto Sheffield Avenue. It was clearly that kind of a sermon. They compared Jesus to their best preachers. But, as sometimes happens to real hum-dingers, someone got up to challenge Jesus. Sometimes we say things in church that challenge the established order of things. Sometimes we say things that are hard to hear. Sometimes we say things that we will spend a lifetime wrestling with. After all, we say things here, like, "I proclaim to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins." We pray that "God's kingdom come, God's will be done." Truly, this is amazing and difficult stuff, if we have the ears to hear it.

With the knowledge only a narrator has, Mark says that the person who stands to challenge Jesus has “an unclean spirit.” Maybe a demon, maybe not. Let’s focus on the unclean part. Remember that First Century Judaism - and really the First Century as a whole - is purity-based. Dame Mary Douglas was a sociologist who wrote about purity in organizational systems. She said that purity created a hierarchy in which “there is a place for everything, and everything in its place.” But when something or someone is unclean, polluted, or dirty, they are “out of place” or have no place at all. Douglas talks about soil and dirt. Soil in the garden is one thing, but when it comes in the house we call it dirt. What makes this person in the synagogue - or this spirit - unclean is that it is out of place. They don’t belong here. Was it what was said? Or did this person slip in the back door when no one was looking?

We solve the problem of things out of place by separating from them. We’re repulsed by them - repelled by them. We certainly don’t have the kind of hierarchy of First Century Judaism, which was preoccupied with keeping dirt of one kind or another out of their holy hierarchy, but we certainly have a hierarchy based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, mental health, housing or employment status. We certainly have people and situations we avoid, that we try to keep separate from. Within us, there is much we hide for fear that we will be separated from others. Inside us - as Pr. Lecia said in her Children’s Message on Wednesday - is a mess that we can’t clean up on our own, but which we are also terrified to reveal.

But watch what Jesus does. Jesus confronts the unclean spirit directly. He doesn’t avert his eyes. He doesn’t leave. He doesn’t demand separation or attempt to quietly enforce it with tasteful, face-saving measures. He confronts the spirit, and, in casting it out, restores the person to wholeness. Dr. David Rhoads, Professor Emeritus of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, wrote, “Mark presents the view that people are to overcome uncleanness by spreading wholeness. Here God does not withdraw because of the threat of defilement by contact with the unclean. Rather, God’s holiness is an active force that expands and invades in order to remove and to overcome uncleanness.” Imagine the scene now, as Jesus stands to answer the confrontation. Imagine the handful of steps he takes to stand toe to toe with someone everyone else saw instantly as unclean. Jesus was not repulsed. Where a line had been drawn, Jesus crossed it without fear or hesitation. Imagine now the rebuke, the convulsion, and at that close proximity, imagine the first thing the person sees - not horror, but the face of love. The one who saw all of him—the whole of him.

This is the kind of work we’re invited to join, the kind of work that occupies and engages those who seek the kin-dom of God. The work of expanding and invading boundaries to dismantle hierarchies and bring about wholeness. The work of confronting divisions in the name of restoration.

A little over a week ago, Beacon, Incorporated, who work in Bloomington among people experiencing homelessness or poverty, opened a new low-barrier, cold weather shelter. Where some shelters require clients to be clean, or attend worship, or abandon their partners or their dogs, Beacon set about to provide simple warmth and shelter for those who needed it - no questions asked. Last Sunday, they embarked on a grassroots fundraising campaign on Facebook to raise \$10,000. In less than eight hours, they surpassed that goal. This is the kind of kin-dom work we're talking about. A shelter that doesn't look away, but confronts the problem of a lack of shelter head-on. A shelter that doesn't ask people to be anything other than who they are in order to provide something simple in the name of wholeness. In the name of serving the whole person. A community that gives generously in the name of that mission. That's kin-dom work.

Let me here shamelessly plug our year-long emphasis on understanding, advocating for, and serving people experiencing homelessness, which kicks off this Wednesday at 7pm on Zoom with a Forum on Homelessness in Bloomington. The Rev. Forrest Gilmore, Executive Director of Beacon, and Ms. Emily Pike, Executive Director of New Hope for Families, will be our guests.

Beloved, this is your work, too. By your baptism, you're invited to this work - in the world and in your life. The work of God's expanding wholeness transforms our lives. Sometimes we're just like this person, we're afflicted with an unclean spirit. We're so angry - angry that no one agrees with us, angry at the bigotry which fractures life, angry at what we've lost, angry at a future that will never be. A line has been drawn, and we may even have been the ones to draw it. But Jesus invades, crosses every line, expands the boundaries, encircles us. Jesus casts out the spirit that binds us and restores us to wholeness. Jesus gives us the authority in our own lives to make friends with our grief, to celebrate our disabilities, to love ourselves in the beautiful ways we've been made.

Amen.