
Demons, Authority, The Spiritual World

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam G. Candler
Epiphany 4 – Year B

Jesus rebuked the man with the unclean spirit, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. Mark 1:25-26

To try to explain just what the term “unclean spirit” meant in New Testament times, or what “possessed by a demon” meant, is a bit devilish.

When Jesus cast out unclean spirits, or demons, the gospels describe behavior for which we, in our own time, seem to have reasonable and medical explanations. What past generations may have described as “unclean spirits,” or even “demons,” modern science and modern medicine have often been able to treat successfully.

So maybe some of the maladies described in the New Testament were what we would call today brain seizures, or epilepsy, or some brain injury, or some mental illness, or even some addiction. I am thankful for the medical professions who capably treat these illnesses.

However, I must also admit that there are some phenomena in our human condition which continue to resist, and to defeat, our medical prowess, and which we might accurately name as unclean spirits or demons. I think of addictions, for instance, drug and alcohol addictions, which some among us rightly call demonic.

Our human condition is susceptible to many addictions and obsessions and mental anxieties that have the power to overwhelm us. I think of so many depressions and anxieties and compulsions which can be treated—yes—but which untreated can also destroy good human beings.

At any given time in our world, we ourselves, and the people around us, are susceptible to some of these anxieties and obsessions. We are susceptible to going crazy. And, at any given time in our world, we are around people who might be ill, who might be liable to a little crazy behavior.

If you come to church enough, you will note some crazy people even here! Now, when I use the word “crazy” I don’t mean any disrespect. I am describing any one of us, at some point or another. But I do also mean people who do not have a steady home or sustainable lifestyle or who are truly mentally troubled. Some are street people; others have a stable living situation, but they are mentally disturbed.

Here at the Cathedral, and at most churches, we treat such people with graciousness and care. The Book of Hebrews reminds us to show hospitality to strangers, for in doing so, we may entertain angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2).

According to the Gospel of Mark, the people with the unclean spirits, the demons, actually play an important role. They are the first people to recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God. According to the Gospel of Mark, the actual disciples of Jesus – the apostles – are most often the people who *mis-understand*, who don’t get it; and the demons are the people who *do understand*, who do get it! In today’s gospel passage, the man with the unclean spirit is the first person to formally declare that Jesus of Nazareth is the Holy One of God. Wow!

Thirty years ago, when I was working as a chaplain at the old Georgia Mental Health Institute, I was with a group of six other chaplains. Together, we were about to walk through the adolescent mental health ward. We knew there would be some eccentric and awkward behavior. And there was one among us chaplains who was quite scared. He tried to hide his fear, and we told him he would be fine.

As we walked together down the hall, our fearful colleague was careful to walk right in the middle of our pack, protected as it were by the rest of us. He was in the middle of our crowd. And wouldn't you know it. The wildest patient on the mental health floor walked up to our group, spotted our fearful colleague in a most intuitive way, and immediately punched him in the stomach. Our colleague's fear somehow attracted the reaction of patient. The people we might name as "crazy" often do have accurate intuitions, and they can name the truth in some awkward and embarrassing ways.

Yes, if you come to church often enough, you will surely note some people the world might call "crazy." But it is a good thing that healthy Christian churches actually attract people who have mental distress or spiritual distress. If we truly represent Jesus here, and if we truly proclaim the presence of Christ here, then we must expect that all sorts of people will be attracted here, just as the man with the unclean spirit was attracted to Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark!

One of our cathedral clergy was at lunch the other day, in one of our neighborhood establishments. Suddenly, there was someone standing next to her who called her by name. "Hello, Pastor," he said, "I know who you are." He proceeded to call her by name, and then he called me by name. He said, "I know Pastor Candler too. I know the Cathedral."

"In fact," he said, "tell Pastor Candler hello and thank you." "Thank you for saving my life," he said. Then he told Canon Williams his name. (We will call him "Doug" this morning).

So, Canon Williams told me a few days later about her encounter with Doug. When she told me his name, and that he was thanking us for saving his life, I was astounded. I remembered immediately who he was.

About ten years ago, Doug was awful and crazy around here. He was mean and rude. He verbally abused staff and parishioners. In fact, one day he convinced a faithful and sincere parishioner to give him a ride somewhere. That parishioner ended up having his wallet stolen. Doug was not an angel masquerading as a stranger. He definitely had an unclean spirit; he had lots of demons.

And so we cast him out. We actually cast him out. Literally. We obtained a police order; and we generated a formal letter, which we handed to him, that said he was no longer allowed on church property. That seems like a harsh thing to have done, doesn't it, to kick someone off the church property. But we were acting with Christian firmness. We cast him out.

And so I was astounded to hear his report a few days ago. Apparently, he is back in the neighborhood, and he told Canon Williams that we had saved his life. We saved his life by casting him out. In doing so, it turns out that we were acting with authority, even spiritual authority.

If Jesus is not afraid to act with authority, then we should not be afraid to act with authority either. The spiritual authority of Jesus, and the unexplainable behavior of disturbed people around us, both remind us that we live not only in a physical and mental world. We live in a spiritual world.

In the spiritual world, the people we call crazy actually do know some profound truths; and disturbed people can intuit things. They can sometimes see things that conventionally thinking people cannot see. In the spiritual world, things we think are hidden are in plain sight.

In the spiritual world, it is quite evident who Jesus of Nazareth is, to saint and sinner alike. "I know who you are," said the man, "you are the Holy One of God." And as soon as he was recognized, Jesus immediately exercised his authority.

In the spiritual world, this church is exactly the same sort of place where Jesus walked. We are a place who recognizes the spiritual authority of Jesus of Nazareth as the Holy One. We can cast out demons – with the same authority. We can cast out demons – with prayer and with medicine. We can cast out demons – with grace and with firmness. We can be healed of what hinders us, and cleansed of what harms us. We can be saved, and sent forth to love and to serve the world.

AMEN.

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