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## *Gospel Katharsis and Our Contemporary Spirits*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**

**Epiphany 4 – Year B**

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*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Paraphrase, Psalm 19:14)*

“But Jesus rebuked him,” our gospel translation says. Now ‘rebuke’ is a very harsh word. But it’s the very word that is used to describe the exorcism that Jesus performed for that man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue that day in Capernaum (Mark 1:25a; NRSV). I’m going to return that word in a moment. But first: a related issue. Today we get to ask and explore the question: What is Jesus’ authority and power for exorcising unclean spiritualities among us today? That’s right! We have just translated our gospel story from the first century to the twenty-first century, by asking the question: What is Jesus’ authority and power for exorcising unclean spiritualities among us today?

To carry us forward into that question I want to retrieve three little words from our gospel story and apply them to some of our most problematic spiritualities in the world today. The three words include the one I just mentioned: “rebuke,” and then the words, “destroy” and “unclean.”<sup>[1]</sup> First take that word, “rebuke.” Years ago as a younger scholar I had a church elder rebuke me on a particular point of view. She did so simply and straightforwardly, so that I took no offense, and her wisdom has stuck with me ever since. In fact that experience has served me all these years as a perfect example of one of my favorite Psalm verses, in the version translated in *The Book of Common Prayer*. “Let the righteous strike me,” the verse starts; and then concludes, “in friendly rebuke.” That’s right, Psalm 141, verse 5 declares,

Let the righteous strike me *in friendly rebuke*.

Wow—what a concept!—“*friendly rebuke*.” Well, that’s exactly what that church elder did for me back-in-the-day. “Thee,” she said, arresting my attention. I had been presenting on a point about the importance of equality and peer relationships in working for social justice and in liberation theology. “Thee,” she said so simply and straightforwardly: “It’s not hierarchy that’s bad. Good hierarchy is good. It’s only bad hierarchy that’s bad.” Then she listed compelling examples of parents exercising good hierarchy over children, teachers over students or disciples, commanders over troops, and supervisors exercising good hierarchy over subordinates.

Well, I had to acknowledge the power of her argument and so I shifted my perspective and said, “I stand corrected!” But more to the point: I’m *still* standing today; that is, still standing corrected in a way that does not make me feel that I was shamed, humiliated or somehow, ‘destroyed.’<sup>[2]</sup> And already here, Christian friends, already I anticipate a one-line theme or topic that you can take away from today’s sermon: the Gospel corrects us in ways that leave us still standing—standing and not destroyed, and even flourishing. And that shows how we are dealing with the remaining two words from our gospel story today: When dealing with an issue of correcting or releasing someone from some captivity, attachment, or possession—including demonic possession or any kind of servile attachment, we are called to do so without destroying but rather benefiting the recipient of that correction.

Now as it happens, all today’s scriptures are about that kind of “faithful correction” or “friendly rebuke.” It’s probably harder to see in our Old Testament reading, but I would be happy to show it to you there as well.<sup>[3]</sup> Certainly we’ll see “friendly rebuke” in Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians in a few moments. But first we focus on the gospel story of Jesus’ first

exorcism as recorded in Mark. That story is also our best place to start because Mark's gospel gives us a word that provides the capstone of gospel wisdom for us here today: the Greek word for catharsis (Greek: *katharsis*; cf. *akathartos*, unclean).

Catharsis means 'cleansing,' 'purging,' 'purifying,' or 'release,' like a medicine that cleanses the body, or an emotional reaction like laughter or anger that releases or purges one's emotions. Now as we all know, humor is a key example of catharsis that releases emotions through laughter. We'll return to cathartic humor shortly. But catharsis can also release or purge fear, anger, or resentment, which we'll also revisit soon. In that connection we may recall Aristotle's classic description of tragedy in the form of drama or theatre; tragedy as achieving the release or *katharsis* of pity and terror. And terror, as we all know too well, is a key element in our world today.

So that brings us to a current-day example of two interlocking spiritualities that are each crying out for the cleansing of Christ that we see revealed and manifest in today's scriptures; manifest and revealed, I emphasize, in order to highlight our Epiphany season of manifestations of Christ as the 'light of the world.' To set the current-day context we may simply observe two spiritualities in recent news stories that are locked in mortal combat. I refer to the Paris terrorist attacks that occurred earlier this month. In commenting on those attacks one commentator remarked as follows.

There was the atrocity itself – the mass murder – and there was the enormous French reaction and the sign, *Je Suis Charlie*. And France, you know, has a large Muslim minority, which unlike the Muslim minority in the United States, is concentrated in a single ethnic group. Most of the Muslims of France come from the same North African area that was colonized by France. And unlike the Muslims of the United States, the Muslims of France are often unemployed, ghettoized, suffering various kinds of social pathology or disability. So this is a very serious domestic problem in France. And I appreciate the problem – the challenge that they face.

Then the commentator explains:

But *Je Suis Charlie* has a double meaning. For the millions of demonstrators saying *I am Charlie* meant, you think you've killed *Charlie Hebdo* but let me tell you – I'm still here. You haven't killed me and you'll have to kill all of us if you want to kill off the French spirit of wit and satire and total freedom of speech. Who can disagree with that, you think. But the cartoons that had to do with Islam, you know, portraying a naked Muhammad writhing on his belly and asking the observer, do you like my [behind]? Cartoons like that seem to say to Muslims, *Charlie Hebdo* despises you – we despise your prophet and we despise you. And so when all of France rises up and says, *I am Charlie Hebdo*, all of France seems to be rising up and saying to the Muslims, we too despise you, we too scorn you just as the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* did.

Here the commentator concludes:

And you have to recognize that this [slogan, *I am Charlie Hebdo*] is a metaphor and metaphors are always subject to more than one interpretation, and here are two perfectly clear, perfectly reasonable, but fatally contradictory interpretations. (Jack Miles, editor of the new *Norton Anthology of World Religions* interviewed by Terry Gross, host of Fresh Air, National Public Radio on 1/29/2015; italics mine. <http://www.wbur.org/npr/382388786/editor-picks-religions-for-the-first-norton-anthology-of-world-religions>)

Well, that was the commentary that some of you may also have heard last week on National Public Radio. It describes a diabolical set of catharses that two wounded peoples are carrying out on one another; catharses of cartoon humor or satire and catharses of terrorist resentment and rage that both sides are acting out in ways that intermesh and destroy one another. Now, as a spiritual observer myself I include all parties to all conflicts as 'wounded spirits'—as persons, groups, communities and cultures who are wounded by the fatal human flaw that incurs death and destruction precisely by acting out its own fear of death and destruction.

But this is not the place to explore the French fear of former colonists or of new immigrants, nor the French fear of foreign occupation following WWII. Yet we would miss a key connection to our scriptures for today if we neglected hearing from one more observer who looked prophetically over his beloved Western civilization in the decades leading up to World War II.

Johan Huizinga (December 7, 1872 – February 1, 1945) was a Dutch cultural historian writing in the early twentieth century. In the 1940s he was imprisoned for his outspoken views against the Nazis until he died in detention a few weeks before

they were defeated in 1945. He is best known as the author of two books, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924) and *Homo Ludens*: [On] *The Play Element in Culture* (1939). But from our gospel perspective here today we pay homage to his 1935 book, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*. (The Excavator <http://disquietreservations.blogspot.com/2013/04/johan-huizinga-on-need-for-spiritual.html>)

In that book Huizinga called for a “spiritual regeneration of the individual and a rebirth of humanity.” Moreover he called that regeneration and rebirth a *katharsis* or “purification of culture.” Writing with a prophetic vision, or as someone we might today call a futurist, he declared that:

A new culture can only grow up in the soil of a purged humanity ... [of a] *Katharsis* ... [that] liberates from the violent passions of life and leads the soul to peace ...

Jan Huizinga, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (Norton, 1936) pp. 231,233-35,237-38.

Well right here, if my former church elder were hearing me present those passages about a new *katharsis*, she might offer an update on her wisdom about hierarchy from years ago. I wonder what she would say if she saw the provocative examples of cathartic humor from the cartoonists at *Charlie Hebdo*. I expect she would first bring me to a pause by calling my name, “Thee.” And then she might offer something like, “Thee, it’s not catharsis that’s good. Bad catharsis is bad; it’s only good catharsis that’s good.” And finally she might offer some compelling examples of good catharsis and bad.

Her examples of ‘bad catharsis’ might include political humor on the one hand, and terrorist acts on the other, that appear to release or purge but are really un-cathartic or even un-*clean*. Indeed these are forms of bad catharses that may be described as counterfeit spiritualities that deceive and hold people hostage in ways that prevent them from being genuinely purged or released from their attachments or captivity. As an opposite example of good catharsis my elder might include our epistle from the apostle Paul. Citing his “friendly rebuke” of fellow Christians in the church at Corinth, she would acknowledge a kind of ‘good catharsis’ in the apostle’s efforts to purge, purify, cleanse, or release the Corinthians from putting stumbling blocks in front of each other over that controversy about food sacrificed to idols. “Don’t put stumbling blocks in the way of your brothers and sisters in ways that you *know* will cause them to fall or stumble into destructive reactions—and even self-destructive reactions.” That’s what the apostle in his Christ-like spirit would be saying in our twenty-first century. “Don’t be unclean in that way!”

Now, if both parties to these two spiritualities were to overhear us discerning and diagnosing their conflicted interaction as we are doing so here today, I would hope that they—and all parties to other conflicts related or not [\[4\]](#)—I would hope that hearing our Christian discourse today they would be able to nod their heads in tacit agreement as I did so many years ago. Of course they might not yet, or ever, be able to say boldly or declare fully, “I stand corrected.” But at least they would be still standing and not destroyed. And maybe one day before the “waning” of this millennium they will be able to come out from under “the shadow of tomorrow” (Huizinga). God-willing, they may find a Christ-like path to being genuinely purged, cleansed, purified or released.

And to that end let us pray again our Collect appointed for this Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. The Lord be with you ... Let us pray together:

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*The Book of Common Prayer* (Church Hymnal Society, 1979), p. 112 (also: [www.lectionarypage.net/YearB\\_RCL/Epiphany/BEpi4\\_RCL.html](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Epiphany/BEpi4_RCL.html))

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[\[1\]](#) “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!’” (Mark 1:23-25)

[\[2\]](#) Cf. “Saving the Proposition of the Other” in Raymond G. Helmick, S.J., *Living Catholic Faith in a Contentious Age* (A &

C Black, 2010), pp. 48-50; quoting a suppressed paragraph by Ignatius Loyola in *The Spiritual Exercises*: “it is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to save the proposition of another than to condemn it as false. If he is unable to save the proposition, the one who made it should be asked how he understands it, and if he understands it badly, it should be discussed with him with love. If this does not suffice, all appropriate means should be used so that, understanding his proposition rightly, he may save it.”

[3] In that connection these intriguing verses cry out for exegesis. “If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.’ Then the LORD replied to me: ‘They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command’” (Deuteronomy 18:16-18). The entire selection of Deuteronomy 18:15-20 is evidently included historically in lectionaries for this Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany to refer to Christian interpretation of the portrayal of Jesus in the gospels as that “prophet like you from among their own people.”

[4] “By taking sides, we inevitably ignore the true center of gravity of the process—the scapegoat mechanism, still religiously transfigured . . . The whole religious dimension of these events remains hidden by too exclusive an emphasis on the political aspects, real as they are.—René Girard, *Job: Victim of His People* (Stanford Univ., 1987); p. 59; cf. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Johns Hopkins Univ., 1986).