
Don't Let Them Take Your Religion Away From You!

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Epiphany 4 – Year B**

Unedited transcript:

What have you to do with us, oh, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? What do you think the demon meant when he said those words to Jesus? They are curious I think. They come right at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, right at the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. He has been baptized, he's gone to the wilderness, he's gathered together his disciples, and then he goes into the synagogue at Capernaum. He starts his ministry right in the most sacred place in Jewish society. And as he walks into the synagogue, he sees a demon there and he exorcizes that demon.

And then after that we see one exorcism after another, and interspersed we see healings and we also see the building of community, the spreading of the word of Jesus and people gathering in order to be healed. And we also see something else. We see some political conflict. And so I don't think you can really understand this story unless you look at the entire first three chapters of Mark. Jesus's public ministry will be again in Capernaum. It will begin along the Sea of Galilee, and in those three chapters, it will end there as well.

It is as if they were meant to be read together as one piece, and that makes a lot of difference because if you think the only thing that the story is saying about Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum is that he has our authority that others do not have, or that he can exorcize demons, I think you would be missing the largest part of the story. You see, in those explanations there's nothing new. It wouldn't have astonished anybody for a healer to come in and have supernatural powers and exercise demons or heal people. There were lots of folks in antiquity that were around doing just that.

And if we get to the sixth verse of the third chapter, we see that the scribes are conspiring against Jesus. They have already had enough. They won't arrest him mind you until the 14th chapter of Mark, but they've had enough by the sixth verse of the third chapter. Why is that? I don't think it was just because Jesus was healing people. I don't think it was just because Jesus was exorcizing demons. I think it was because Jesus was challenging the political order, because that's of course what he's doing. That demon is not just a demon and an individual. That demon is a symbolic presentation in this story. It represents not just evil in an individual sense, but evil in a structural sense. It represents the power structure of the scribes and those in charge who were setting the rules of purity, who were setting the codes that marginalized the sick and the poor, that marginalized the tax collectors and those considered to be impure.

Like other systems that we are more familiar with, the burden of the systems established by the religion at that time fell most heavily on the poor, and I think Jesus saw that. So there's some hints early on that this is what's going on. Right after our exorcisms comes the first healing. Jesus goes to Simon Peter's house and heals his mother, but he doesn't do it, and this is an interesting detail. Until after sundown on the Sabbath, that is to say, after the Sabbath is over. When Jesus starts his ministry, it's only after the prohibition against work on the Sabbath that he performs this healing, but it's not long thereafter before he is doing the healings on the Sabbath because the Jewish authorities are pressing him and he is responding.

So what's the point? The point is this is not just a story about healing. This is not just a story about a supernatural God man who comes down and demonstrates his supernatural power. This is a story about religion and politics, because that's what it is, Jesus is challenging the political order. Jesus is going into the most sacred part of Jewish life, and he is engaging the demons of the structures and powers that he finds there

and he is doing it I think as we see over and over again in Jesus's ministry, because it is disproportionately affecting the poor, it is marginalizing the sick.

So what does that mean for us today? I am often hearing people say, don't mix religion and politics, separate church and state. The first thing I want to say is that rule, the separation of church and state, that was to protect the church from the state, not to protect the state from the church. If we are to follow Jesus's example, then we are to speak out against violence and racism and the structures of evil that disproportionately affect the poor and the sick and those who don't have voice or ability to protect themselves. That is key to Jesus's ministry. And we can't be Christians without adding our voice to that. That is political.

We as Christians are called to speak to politics, not to terrorize each other with our political positions on this policy or that, but to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, to speak against violence, to speak against racism, to comment against the abuse of power that we confront. This is what Jesus is doing throughout his early ministry in Capernaum. You might actually call it a direct action campaign, healings, exorcisms, community gatherings, political conflict. That's what we see in this story, and that's what we're called to engage in.

There is no separation of church and state in Jesus's ministry. Jesus is looking at the dignity of every human being as we describe it in our baptismal covenant. Jesus is standing where they stand and he is identifying and speaking truth to the powers that would strip their dignity, leave them less alive. He is looking at those who are alienated and bringing them into community. He's looking at the least and the lost and the last and he is naming them and the demons don't like it. You can tell right away in our passage when they try to name Jesus, "Oh, I know you the Holy one of God. You are like Elisha." That was that, where that phrase comes from, the Holy word of God. That is less than we think Jesus is of course, but it is an interesting tactic on the part of the demon. If they can name who Jesus is, they can control who Jesus is.

They try it again several stories later when they say, "Ah Beelzebub, you must be from Satan and that's how you're casting out demons." We know Jesus's response, a house divided cannot stand. And it is interesting that it's in the fifth chapter when Jesus has the [inaudible 00:08:43] demoniac give his name Legion. We have flipped in five chapters from the demons trying to name Jesus to the demons, giving up their own name. That is to say, being revealed for who they are. There isn't a separation of church and state when it comes to standing up for those who are victimized. There isn't a separation of church and state when it comes to looking after the least and the lost and the last. No, there's more.

Jesus calls to us to live into a politics, into a culture and art of living together, which knows there's going to be conflict and doesn't shy away from it, which is able to express our opinion in truth to another and hear the other's response. Jesus calls us into an art of living together where we do respect the dignity of every human being, and they can't lose that dignity. We can discredit their behavior, we can call out where they have been wrong, but we cannot just make random ad hominem attacks against who they are because our faith doesn't let us do that. We are forced to constantly try to be charitable. We are forced to constantly try to remember what happened in a way that doesn't further our own vindictive impulses, that doesn't highlight our own triumph over another, which does it eliminate inconvenient truths.

Don't let them take your religion away from you. Don't let them tell you that there's not supposed to be conflict. That's the way it's going to be. Don't let them tell you that you don't need to respect the dignity of every human being. We do. Don't let them tell you that you shouldn't be suspicious of power. Jesus starts his ministry suspicious of power. And don't let them tell you that there can't be social progress because Jesus shows us how we can help create social progress and believe in it. These things, expectation of conflict, respect to the dignity of every human being, suspicion of power and belief in progress, these are things that I think arise out of our faith. These are structures of the way we live together that are political.

So don't let them take your religion away from you. Don't let them force you into memories that are not charitable. Religion is the way we engage politics. Let me put a sharper point on this, because I'm not just articulating standards of democratic liberalism. I want to go further because there's a particular task for us right now. We have endured a year that I hope never to endure again, 2020, racial unrest, contentious election politics, a pandemic, but now at a time when in some ways it seems the darkest, I'm also feeling the most hope. How are we going to remember 2020? How are we going to tell the story? Are we going to be truthful? Are we going to be charitable? Or are we going to be vindictive? Are we going to be demonizing? How were we going to tell the story?

Well, we tell the whole story or the part of the story? Or we tell the part that we're a hero or the part where we maybe weren't? How were you going to remember this year? Did you think about Jesus going into that

synagogue at Capernaum? I want you to think about Jesus demanding the truth from others, telling the truth himself, and more importantly than all of that, being the truth in his mere presence. "Who are you?" the demon said. But the demon knew. The demon knew what the truth would do to those structures of evil. The demon knew that Jesus was the truth, and may Jesus be your guide. May Jesus be your empowering spirit, may Jesus and his ministry be our guide, our work, that is more important than who we are, even how we look while we're doing it. It's about the work. It's about the work of creating a new order. It's about the work of creating a new people. It's not about us actually, it's about the work. Amen.

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