
Sermon for February 7, 2021

**A sermon from the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Outdoor Service of Koinonia
Epiphany 5 – Year B**

In the name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen. Good morning, and welcome to the Koinonia service on this lovely winter day in Epiphany. In the Gospel reading for today, we find Jesus on what has already been a long journey. It is about to get longer. During his exile of 40 days in the wilderness he was tempted by Satan, forced to face his own demons, by virtue of the very power he, and Satan, knew he possessed. When we encounter him in today's reading he has journeyed to Capernaum, where has been teaching in the synagogue, healing, and casting out demons.

And not just teaching, but teaching with authority, to the astonishment of the people there, as we heard last week. As a seminary professor I can tell you that authority and astonishment are not easily achieved in the classroom. The root of the word **authority** comes from the same Latin root as our word "**author**," and this is instructive, because an authority is, in the best sense of the word, someone who creates—one, that is, in relation to whom one finds a life-giving flourishing...a kind of *increase* in relation to which one feels enlivened. Or, as Irenaeus put it, "**God fully glorified is a human being fully alive.**" Jesus has that kind of authority—to help us become fully alive—in contrast to an authority which comes by virtue of an office or some kind of rank, such as a political post, or judgeship, or, Lord help me, that of a priest or rabbi. Indeed, the people were amazed by Jesus in part because he was not a member of the Sanhedrin—he held no *formal* authority of any kind. His authority came from within—and from God—and in a real sense in this passage Jesus comes into his own—he comes home—in terms of his vocation as a teacher and healer. Howard Thurman has said "**Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is more people who have come alive.**" Perhaps as much as anything this passage is about Jesus' ministry coming alive in a profoundly new way. He is inviting us to do likewise.

I find myself curious, though, about the relationship between his authority—this excellence as a teacher as exhibited by Jesus—and the journey he had been on. I find myself wondering if there might be some connection between his exile in the wilderness, for example, and the suffering he encountered there, and his ability to teach with authority. Moreover, he is not just a teacher in this gospel reading, he is, as we heard last week and today, one who casts out demons. He is in this sense a wounded healer who struggled with his own demons. And so are we all. Might that, too, I wonder, be connected with his suffering through the facing of his own demons, which is what part of his time in the wilderness was all about?

Now, I don't know about you, but discussions of demons don't occur much in my line of work as a professor who often teaches clinical courses, and in my clinical practice. In the circles I run in, we are so thoroughly imbued with western scientific rationalism that talk of demon possession simply doesn't occur in polite company. We talk instead of mental illness, and "diagnostic" categories, and neurological substrates contributing to neuroplasticity, and so on. Is this a more appropriate way of looking at the encounter Jesus had in the synagogue with the man with the unclean spirit? And today we hear, "**That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.**" Were these souls suffering from what we would call a mental illness? I do not know. And what kind of journey have these possessed persons been on? Just as many of our homeless mentally ill are marginalized, and have no voice in our culture we do not hear from these souls either. I imagine they were sojourners, too, as are we. And the man in the passage from last week, who was clearly suffering. How did he find himself there on this day? Did he once have a family, a job,

and a home? Or, was he rather a life-long homeless person whose life had taken a turn for the worse—a guy just down on his luck, like a veteran with PTSD, or addicted in some way? Did he even want the kind of transformation he received in his encounter with Jesus? I see people in my clinical office who are paradoxically ambivalent about the very change they claim to want. Whatever we might say about his condition, I think we are safe to say it was a form of evil... that is to say, the spirits in those “possessed” are called “unclean” because whatever their afflictions, and however we understand them, they caused a separation from God, and others. It’s a form of deprivation, of loss, of being cut off from his ability to be his true self and from full relationship with others, in community. I don’t mean to suggest that this man in the synagogue was evil, but rather that, for whatever reasons, his soul was frozen. He had shut down. And it is precisely Irenaeus’ experience of being *fully alive*, manifest in each of us, which is threatened by evil. And this evil, whatever it was, was this man’s own particular form of bondage; a binding, choking, life-suffocating bondage. I suspect that—whatever form evil takes— it has its own peculiar manifestation for each of us. The end result, however, is always the same: it threatens to separate us from the Creator, and from relationships with others whom God created to share this journey with us.

And so our experience of life, though potentially one full of vitality and wonder, is, instead one of being in bondage. And isn’t this what Satan used to threaten Jesus in the Wilderness? ***“Use the power you know you have,”*** Satan told Jesus, ***“in order to have authority and control over all others, and to have everything you need”***? Had Jesus consented to this, I suspect the end result have been the end of his true and fully- alive relationship with God, and, come to that, with us. It is precisely Jesus’ own experience of suffering in the wilderness that allows him to act with compassion in the reading for today... compassion, from the Latin *compassio*, to “suffer with”, means that one takes action in response to the encounter with suffering. Jesus encountered his own demons, faced them down, and by virtue of that suffering reached out to the man in the synagogue, and healed his broken spirit. This is why today’s text suggests that the demons did not speak, because he knew them. He knew them because he faced them in himself, and called them by name.

Most often what threatens to cut us off from God, and self, and other is the experience of our own finitude and vulnerability...those real human limitations our awareness of which put us most at risk for idolatry and bondage, to use these old-fashioned words, when we seek to secure our souls in ways destined to fail. Psychiatrist Robert Waldinger, current director of the Harvard Grant Study, the longest running longitudinal study in history, has said ***“it’s the quality of your relationships that matter most.”*** And the researchers have found that quantity counts, too. Looking back on their lives, people most often reported their time spent with others as most meaningful, and the part of their lives of which they were the proudest. Spending time with other people made study subjects happier on a day-to-day basis, and in particular, time with a partner or spouse seemed to buffer them against the mood dips that come with aging’s physical pains and illnesses.

And this is precisely what Jesus offered the man in the synagogue from this same text in Mark’s Gospel. In the midst of our encounter with our demons—with whatever binds us and separates us from relationship with God and God’s creation—we experience the possibility of a summons, an invocation, a claim or call to commitment and relationship. It’s as if Jesus is saying to us ***“Remember me? Something has occurred between us... I know who you are...you are one who comes to take me to church... you are the one who worked at the food pantry... who helped build the Habitat House...you called me when I had not been around and you missed me... you cared for me when I was sick... you saw my face in the face of the stranger...you had compassion”***.

Some time back the singer /songwriter James Taylor wrote a clever tune in response to the discovery of the very well preserved, 5,000 year-old body of a hunter in found it the Tyrolean alps. I’ve followed this story with interest since this man emerged from a glacier in 1991. The most recent article I saw was in National Geographic, and based on additional research we now have a rollicking good murder mystery to add to this narrative. But I digress... The refrain of Taylor’s song is ***“Lord, have mercy on the frozen man.”*** Yes, “Lord have mercy indeed,” because when faced with our demons, each of us—men and women alike—can become frozen in spirit. We face one of the vulnerabilities of being human—namely, that in reality authority and idolatry are intimately related. We must choose carefully, dear one’s when seeking to claim power and authority before gaining humility, and before wrestling with the shadow side of who we are.

This is the gift Jesus offers. The Gospels imply that anyone who casts out demons cannot be a stranger to them. In today’s Gospel vignette we see Jesus clearing out the emptiness of a man’s soul and offering instead, a relationship with God. Jesus hears our suffering, and suffers with us, and offers the compassion of relationship and redemptive healing. And this takes place in community. Anything that would rob us of being fully alive in life-giving ways limits our ability to fully glorify God. As Wendell Berry has written; ***The question before me, now that I am old, is not how to be dead, which I know from enough practice, but how to be alive, as these worn hills still tell, and some paintings of Paul Cezanne, and this mere singing wren,***

who thinks he's alive forever, this instant, and may be. How to be alive, forever, this instant, in Christ...now that's a casting out of demons I can understand. Amen.

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