

John Sampson
"The Exorcists"
Text: Mark 1:21 - 28
Preached at KVCC
January 28, 2018

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

AMEN.

Last week we heard the story of Jesus calling his first disciples to come and follow him.

And we acted out the scene right here in this space.

I played the role of Jesus and a number of you played the role of his first followers.

By using our bodies in the telling of our story I think we discovered that Jesus' invitation to us is intimate and personal. And it's not about him being God, or an immaculate conception. It's about an invitation to the work.

Hard work, never ending work, but important work that gets to the root of what it means to be human and what it means to be in community.

We were invited to feed the hungry, heal the sick, repair fractured relationships. And throughout our enactment Jesus kept reassuring us. He kept saying to us don't worry. I'll show you how it's done. I just need your help.

Well this morning we're on our first mission with Jesus, and it starts out easy enough. We find ourselves following him into a synagogue, and he starts teaching.

And maybe you thought, "Hey, I got this. Maybe I don't know everything about God, and her invitation to us. Maybe I'm not such a great public speaker, or preacher. But given some time I think I might be able to do this. Maybe I could actually be a follower of Jesus."

And just as we're beginning to feel a little bit confident, just as we might consider owning our discipleship, what happens? A man possessed by an unclean spirit shows up in the middle of the synagogue and we see Jesus cast out the spirit.

Maybe we look at this exorcism and we think to ourselves, “Oh boy, am I in over my head! I was OK with feeding, and doing the work to heal broken families, but exorcisms? That’s out of my wheelhouse!”

And I am right there with you. There is no exorcism class in seminary. There is no rite to drive out spirits in the UCC Book of Worship. When I graduated from Union Seminary they didn’t give me a little traveling case with everything I would need to expel a spirit from a possessed person. At first glance I would also agree – exorcism isn’t in my wheelhouse either.

The authors of the gospel of Mark are very spare in the way they describe what the experience of being possessed is all about. They don’t tell us what being invaded by an unclean spirit means for the man in the story. And we only hear from the spirit as it is getting booted out of its nice fleshy home.

So if you're like me you fill in the blanks. You paint your own picture of what being possessed might be like. And I won't lie, as a fan of horror movies, I go right to the greatest exorcism film of all time – the 1973 shocker, *The Exorcist* starring Ellen Burstyn, Max von Sydow, and Linda Blair. In that movie we're given an image of possession where a young girl is turned into a cursing demon, whose head spins around, whose body levitates, and you spits green pea vomit as a couple of priests try to eject the spirit that has invaded her.

Again, if this is what Jesus is asking us to do, if this is the way we are to follow our teacher, we might not feel up to it.

For others of us in this room we may not feel up to taking on the role of exorcist because we may not believe in the very fundamental premise of our story. At best we may feel that the idea of immaterial beings that invade us and take over our minds and bodies to do us

harm, and inflict pain on those around us, is a hold over of an archaic world view that has nothing to do with modernity. Didn't the insights and discoveries of science put to rest the idea of demons and of angels? Didn't our modern psychiatric disciplines show us the material and psychological causes of behaviors that were previously ascribed to possession?

Whether we feel like we can't follow Jesus and take on the role of exorcists because we don't have the skills, or if we can't follow Jesus because we don't believe the story can be true, are we left with nothing other than an artifact from some tradition that can't really speak to us in our lives, here and now?

Since the stories of Jesus and his ministry were first told people have been reflecting on them and trying to translate them into their own experience, so that they make sense and have relevance. I think one of the most famous of our spiritual ancestors, a man who

translated the stories of Jesus into his own experience, can help give us a clue on how we can rescue this story of exorcism from the religious trash heap, and find a way to live into its invitation.

That man, the one who can be our guide, was called Saul, better known to us as Paul the apostle. You see Paul, in one of his many letters, received the stories of Jesus, perhaps even the story from Mark we are considering today, and he said that our fight is never against individuals. It's always against powers, always against a more diffuse enemy. Moving our thought from individuals, whether they are material or immaterial, to powers creates a bridge that speaks to how we use the word spirit today. Think about it. Max Weber entitled his classic work that reflected on the emergence of industry and wealth in predominantly Protestant countries as *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. For Weber capitalism had its own power and enlivening force that guided its development and history.

We ourselves may make statements such as, “I extend my hand to you in a spirit of friendship.” In this case we aren’t saying that we are invaded by some time of immaterial being with its own distinct personality, or are we? We are saying that our act of shaking hands is imbued with the intention, the force, the enlivening principle of friendship, which is invisible and immaterial.

For us today the idea of spirit continues to play a role in our language and in our thinking, but it is depersonalized and deindividualized. It is more inline with Paul, than with Mark.

And in our world filled with the possibility of spirit we are confronted with many forms that are problematic, hurtful and destructive. There is the spirit of selfishness that haunts us all.

There is the spirit of greed that invests our commercial and political spheres. There is the spirit of loneliness and hurt that drives some

of us to self medicate to dull many levels of pain. And we are all touched in some way by these spirits of brokenness. Not in the same way to be sure.

When Jesus comes and drives out the spirit that has infested the man of our story, what he is doing is enacting a ministry of compassion, and of liberation. Again, we are not shown what the damage this spirit is doing to the man, or those around him, but it is implied that being possessed causes deep harm and sorrow. Think of the spirits I have mentioned that infest our world, and our lives. To be followers of Jesus and help do away with them would make us workers of love and of humanity in a time governed by the inhuman.

And if we are truly fighting against powers instead of people or work to resist and defeat the spirits of inhumanity that have so much power in our world, we can have great compassion for those who are inhabited by the powers we seek to overthrow. Instead of

thinking so-and-so in our government is the embodiment of evil, perhaps Jesus asks us to believe that so-and-so is a child of God who needs to be liberated from the power of selfishness, or greed, or political expediency, or sexual violence. Depersonalizing our work of compassion can actually make us that much more compassionate to those on the other side of an issue, or policy, or theory of government.

But how do we become exorcists? If we can come to a place where we can embrace a definition of the spiritual, and of exorcism, that feels authentic to us, and doesn't seem to blindly accept a worldview that is outdated, how do we actually resist and fight the spirits of our world that cause all of us harm, and heartache? Where is our little travel pack with the holy water, and the ritual that will drive out the demons?

The blunt answer is I don't have it.

The true answer is all of you already have it, and if you don't you have what you need to find it.

Think of all of the ways each person in this church this morning is committed to making the world a better place for all of us. One of the tools of exorcism is be a member of an organization that actively fights against the spirit of racism so prevalent in the world. Another tool of exorcism is travel to Washington to witness to the sacredness of women's bodies and the unviability of their rights. Another tool of exorcism is to join in our discernment to making this church a more deeply welcoming space for LGBTQI people. And there are more ways each and every one of you have already found, or are actively seeking, that will bring more love and more equality and more compassion into our world. You see you are already following Jesus because you are already exorcising the darkness of our world.

But perhaps we look at the story of Jesus exorcising the unclean spirit from the man and we question our own effectiveness, and the power of the movements we belong to. Because our story presents an image of an absolute overthrow of the spirit's power. And we can look out over our work, over the history of people dedicated to making our world better and what do we find? We find racism is still as alive as it ever was. There is no end to greed and corruption in government even when the power has been given to the people. Women are still very much the second sex after millennia. Is our story of Jesus performing the exorcism of the man nothing more than a fantasy, a story we would like to believe, but which has no connection to reality?

We talked about the movie *The Exorcist* earlier. And if we use the language of film I would say that the story of Jesus exorcising the spirit is but one scene in a bigger movie. Yes, in this one scene Jesus expels the demon successfully. But he will meet other demons in the

rest of the story. The story of possession is a much bigger story than this one demon and this one man. And come back in ten years.

What might the man of this morning's story tell us? He might say that Jesus drove the demon out and it never came back. Or it might tell us, just like the stories of so many addicts, that he was clean for two years, and then after his mother died, the spirit returned. That's why I love the quotation I shared as our opening meditation in today's bulletin.

Tahir Shah writes, "Everyone knows that even the best exorcism has to be renewed once in a while."

Instead of our work in driving out the demons of our lives and of the world as being complete and absolute, perhaps we need to be vigilant in the understanding that hurtful spirits can return, over and over. Or perhaps when one spirit leaves it allows another to

take its place, or reveal that it was already always there, but simply mute and sleeping.

You see when Jesus calls us to follow him and take on the mantle of exorcist he is calling us to fight the injustices of the world that invade us and make us powerless before their strength. We are all victims. But we are also asked to be liberators for one another. Jesus invites us to resist and fight against the ways we hurt and harm each other. He shows us it can be done. And then he asks us to find ways to live into the work in our own lives, not just one time, but in an ongoing way. You see to follow Jesus, to become the exorcists our world needs us to be, is a full time job. It doesn't end, and it can be exhausting. But isn't it what we agreed to do on the shores of the Sea of Galilee last Sunday.

AMEN.