

I was recently in a conversation with someone and this person told me about the comments of a pastor in our local area. The conversation concerned some local efforts in our area to reach out and offer assistance to people who are financially poor. This local pastor, whom I have been told by some others is a great pastor, was overheard to say, "Well, you know you have to be careful around poor people. In fact, I would rather not have them in my presence."

I thought about this local pastor's comments after reading this morning's gospel lesson. The lesson we are about to read will be coming from the first chapter of the gospel according to Mark. Mark is the shortest of the four gospels and many believe this is the earliest gospel and that Matthew and Luke borrowed stories from Mark and added their own stories that Mark did not include.

Mark begins his account with the baptism of Jesus followed by Jesus calling the first of the disciples. And then Mark begins his account of Jesus' public ministry by telling us the following story. According to Mark, Jesus begins his public ministry with an exorcism.

Read Mark 1: 21-28 (NRSV)

Capernaum is a village on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. The synagogue would not have been a building. The synagogue would have been the faith community gathering together on the Sabbath. Jesus teaches there and we are told that the ones who hear him preach are astounded at what he teaches. For he teaches not as the local leaders do but as one with authority.

In other words, the people present know that there is something very different about him. They may not be able to name it at that point, but they know that he is different than every other teacher that they have ever heard.

In this faith community gathering, a man with an unclean spirit is there. A Spirit which works against that which is good and Holy. An unclean spirit present in the church that Jesus enters.

But we all know something about unclean spirits in churches. There are lots of unclean spirits dwelling in churches. The pastor that I referred to earlier from our area does not want poor people to attend the church where he is the pastor. He does not want poor people to attend that church because he says they only want to take and they have little to give. So in his church, if they follow his lead which I bet they do from what I am told, they want only middle to upper class people to attend that church. No poor people are allowed. Is this an unclean spirit?

I found out a couple of interesting things when I was studying for this sermon. In this text, Mark says that the people were amazed because Jesus spoke as one "having" authority. I discovered that the word "having" can also be translated as "possessed." Jesus is possessed with the Holy Spirit that gives him authority. And we are also told that Jesus "entered" the synagogue. I also discovered that the word translated "entered" is also the same word that describes how demons "enter" a person.

Those two learnings lead me to ask a question which we may not want asked of us. What if the ones with the unclean spirit in ACPC are actually you and me? What if you and I have an unclean spirit within us? Wait a second. We are not the ones with the unclean spirit. That's other people. That is "those" people.

But I read a quote which should make us all ask if maybe we are not the ones with the unclean spirit that needs to turn to Jesus and ask him to exorcise this unclean spirit from us. This quote compares an unclean spirit with the Holy Spirit.

According to the author:

An unclean spirit curses while the Holy Spirit blesses.

An unclean spirit tears someone down while the Holy Spirit builds someone up.

An unclean spirit disparages another while the Holy Spirit encourages another.

An unclean spirit sows hate while the Holy Spirit promotes love.

An unclean spirit seeks to split groups apart while the Holy Spirit seeks to draw people together.

An unclean spirit attracts us toward things that destroy us while the Holy Spirit attracts us toward things that nourish us.

Could it be that you and I have both the Holy Spirit residing in us as well as unclean spirits? And could it be that entering into worship today is our opportunity to ask Jesus to remove the unclean spirit from us and overwhelm us with the presence of the Holy Spirit? Could it be that before we are overwhelmed with the presence of the Holy Spirit that we need to ask for an unclean spirit to be removed from us?

Lots of middle of the road Presbyterian types do not like to talk about exorcism. Sounds a little too hokey or a little too Freewill Baptist for us. But maybe you and I do need some exorcism in our lives. Maybe you and I have an unclean spirit within us that we need to ask to have removed so that we can experience the joy of the Holy Spirit.

This passage teaches us that the unclean spirits within us are weak compared to the Holy Spirit. The unclean spirits are the first ones to recognize the power of Jesus. And they know they do not have a chance. The same can be said of the unclean spirits that invade our bodies and souls.

We do not need to allow ourselves to be overcome by our own unclean spirits. Through the power of God, those spirits can be exorcised.

So call your friends after worship today and tell them that the folks at Allison Creek performed an exorcism. I bet they will not believe you. Presbyterians don't do exorcisms. But I wonder if today we are called to do something that Presbyterians don't usually do. That is to perform an exorcism.

You know, most of us come to church worship and do not expect much to happen. We have low expectations and many times even our low expectations are not met. But this morning I am going to invite us into a time to pray for God's Holy Spirit to exorcise some unclean spirits that reside in us. Those unclean spirits within us that cause us to curse others, that cause us to tear others down, that cause us to disparage others, that cause us to sow hate, that cause us to split groups apart, that cause us to be attracted to unclean addictions.

I am going to invite us into a time a prayer. Whatever is the unclean spirit that resides in you, this is your opportunity to ask for God to remove it. My experience is that these unclean spirits will return. They will seek to return as soon as we leave this place. But I hope that today is at least an opportunity to name those spirits. To name the unclean spirits and ask for God's Holy Spirit to empower us to do the work of the Holy Spirit.

So let us pray together.

God who casts out unclean spirits from your people, we come to you with our own unclean spirit. Hear our prayer as we ask you to remove this unclean spirit from our soul and replace it with the power of your Holy Spirit.

Some of us are battling the unclean spirit of addiction. Some of us are hiding from others our attraction to illegal drugs, over the counter drugs, nicotine, sexual promiscuity, abuse of alcohol. Some of us are hiding from others our attraction to pornography. Others of us are battling the addiction to money, food, and attention. Lord we pray that you remove this unclean spirit from our midst and fill us completely with your Holy Spirit.

Some of us are battling unclean spirits that cause us to tear others down, say hurtful things, sow hate, always look for the negative, and to seek to split people apart. Lord we pray that you remove this unclean spirit from our midst and fill us completely with your Holy Spirit.

Lord, we pray that the same Spirit that allowed Jesus to remove unclean spirits is the same Spirit that removes our unclean spirits so that we, too, become people who speak not as the scribes do but as ones with the authority of your Holy Spirit. It is in the name of the one whose power is greater than any unclean spirit that we pray, AMEN.