

**Dunn’s Corner, Westerly, Service on July 10, 2022: Sermon on
Mark 1, 21-27**

Driving out Evil Spirits

*²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had **authority**, not as the teachers of the law. ²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who **was possessed by an impure spirit** cried out,²⁴ “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”*

*²⁵ “**Be quiet!**” said Jesus sternly. “**Come out of him!**” ²⁶ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.*

²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.”

Dear Friends, good people of Westerly, brothers & sisters in Christ,

(1) *What is an impure spirit?*

I wonder what your association is when you hear the term “**impure spirit**”? What makes a person impure? Is it impure thoughts? Like thoughts about committing a bank-robbery? Or thinking sexual thoughts about other people when we are married or in a committed relationship?

Or, are we talking about thoughts that includes hurting and harming others, i.e., cruel thoughts of physical violence?

Is the Russian president Vladimir Putin possessed by an evil spirit when he dreams of Russia becoming a powerful imperium once again, and therefore attacked the Ukrainian people with unbelievable violence, cruelty and a willingness to bomb an entire country and its people to ashes and rubble?

Or is an ‘impure person’ someone who has suicidal ideation, someone thinking about bringing their own life to an end?

Or, is a person who deliberately lies about - say - the outcome of an election possessed by an impure spirit?

Or, do you think about psychiatric illnesses like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, clinical depression or anxiety when you hear this story about Jesus driving out an impure spirit?

The challenging thing about this biblical passage is that the concept of “possession” by a spirit from another level of reality does not quite fit into our modern worldview. Do we even believe in “spirits” and other levels of reality?

There are many biblical stories that mention “*possession*” and “*exorcism*,” which is the term for driving out evil spirits. The writer of the Gospel of Mark, which scholars consider to be the oldest of the four

Gospels, tells *four* different stories of spirit possessions and exorcisms, this one is the first one!

It is important to mention that possessions and exorcisms are not only told throughout the Bible, they are also attested in many other cultures, in Africa, Asia and the Americas throughout the ages. And they have consistent parallels, descriptions they all coincide in:

According to **Marcus Borg**, a highly regarded scholar of the New Testament and the socio-historical context of Jesus' world, "*possession occurs when a person falls under the control of an evil spirit or spirits. Such people are inhabited by a presence that they (and others) experience as **other than themselves**, (...) they exhibit bizarre and often destructive or self-destructive behavior.*"

Let me repeat that sentence: "*Such people are inhabited by a presence that they (and others) experience as **other than themselves**.*" Do you know such experiences, dear friends, times when you don't feel like yourself? Times when we do things even though we know they are not good for us – like eating chips on the couch when we know they are unhealthy? Or that we rather watch a show or a game on television, even though we know it would be good for us to go for a walk, or a bike-ride or work out?

In Romans 7, 19 Paul says: "*For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.*"

Is that what this passage is talking about, our lack of discipline?

(2) *Mark 1, 21-27: He taught them as one who had authority*

If we look at the context of our story we can see that it is very much at the beginning of Mark's gospel, in fact it is the third story he tells: First Mark talks about John the Baptist, who baptizes Jesus.

The second story is the calling of the first disciples and the third story Mark tells us is already this story. So, after inviting his companions to follow him, this driving-out-an-impure-spirit is the *first* thing Jesus does in the entire Gospel of Mark! I think we can safely assume, that this passage is super-important to Mark! But why? Why does he put this passage before any other Jesus-story?

I believe the key to answer this question is V 22 in our passage: "*The people were amazed at his [Jesus] teaching, because **he taught them as one who had authority.***" The way Jesus was teaching in synagogue on sabbath was extraordinary, powerful, mind-blowing. People experienced it as if he knew what he was talking about, that he was not sharing bookish learning, but that he was speaking from a place of power and deep understanding. Such a powerful authority emanated from him. It was so impressive that people began talking about Jesus, and following him by the thousands, as we hear later in Mark's Gospel.

The authority Jesus had, gave him the power to sternly speak to the spirit that was possessing the man in our story and tell it to “**come out of him**”. And, lo and behold, the spirit obeyed Jesus. It “*shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.*”

This kind of spirit is definitely of a different order than you or I sitting on our couches, eating potato chips. This story is talking about a powerful force that has inhabited this man and that leaves him under violent protest. It might be more the kind of “spirit” that inhabits patients with a depression so powerful that it paralyzes a patient to immobility. Or that drives a patient who is suffering from bipolar disorder to a manic episode, where they can’t sit still, can’t stop talking, and constantly need to do something, at times foolish and self-destructive actions.

(3) *A clinical example: Depression*

As you all know, I work in a large teaching hospital in Boston. One of my patients was a 21 y/o young woman who had come to Boston from the Midwest to go to a prestigious college. The combination of being lonely, new to Boston, the crushing load of home-work and her fear of failure sent this young woman into a depression. I was able to visit her a few times on our locked psyche-floor and we developed a friendly relationship. She found our conversations about her struggles and her faith to be helpful. One day however, when I wanted to follow up with

her again, she lay in bed, her face covered with sheets and looked at me with blank eyes, practically unresponsive. When I engaged in conversation with her, she just shook her head wordlessly. That went on for a few weeks. She was silent each time I tried to visit her and wouldn't talk to anyone. After about a month of this, one day she greeted me with a smile. She had come out of her depression and was able to now tell me how grateful she was that I had come back again and again, even though she had not responded. She said that the fact that I had returned, and not given up on her, had given her hope that God also had not given up on her in that dark night of depression. Was this young woman possessed by a depressive spirit? And did this spirit slowly leave her, with the help of meaningful conversations, therapy and medication?

(4) *Wrestling with our Inner Angels (Nancy Kehoe)*

I would like to introduce you to **Nancy Kehoe**: She is both a Catholic nun and a licensed clinical psychologist who has spent thirty years working with patients suffering from mental illness. In 2009 she wrote a beautiful book called "*Wrestling with Our Inner Angels. Faith, Mental Illness and the Journey to Wholeness.*" In this book she gives voice to her mental health patients, who suffer from a double pain: 1. the stigma our society ascribes to people with mental illness. We call such people crazy, insane, whacko, lunatic, deranged, nuts! And of course, people who suffer from mental illnesses are afraid of being judged and labeled.

Statistically one out four US-Americans suffers from a form of mental illness at one point in their life. That is a quarter of our population, theoretically every fourth person sitting in the pews here. The second pain, of course, is the effect of the illness itself that can overpower us, that takes away the control we have over our actions and feelings. To me, listening to the patients who talk about their mental illness very much sounds like what Marcus Borg called the effect of being possessed: “*Such people are inhabited by a presence that they (and others) experience as **other than themselves.***” These people describe their illnesses as not allowing them to be themselves!

In her work with these patients Nancy Kehoe integrates these people’s faith and their religious practices to allow them to strive towards healing and wholeness – which is what Jesus enabled the man in the synagogue to be: Himself again!

I really like two things Dr. Kehoe does in her work with mentally afflicted patients: First she *does not pathologize*, or judge the people who are in the grip of these mental illnesses – most often of course against their own will. It is not that anyone chooses to be depressed, or wants to be anxious, or hear voices in their heads.

Second, she places the origin of these struggles deep within our hearts and describes them as part of our journeys towards wholeness: She call

it “wrestling with our inner Angels,” and thus recognizes them as angels, that is messengers of God, and as part of God’s goodness, not a counter-power’s evil doing. And she situates these inner struggles as part of everyone’s journey towards wholeness. In that perspective all of us are fractured, all of us are journeying towards wholeness, so we are not really different than our brothers and sisters who suffer from mental illnesses: We are all struggling, some of us more intensely, some of us less so. And, that is the good news, Jesus will support *all of us* on our respective journeys towards wholeness, just as he helped the man in our story to get rid of the impure spirit that was holding him hostage. When we work towards integrating our broken pieces inside and healing the wounded places we carry we are on route to a sacred whole-ness and holiness.

(5) *Driving out Impure Spirits*

I do believe that these biblical stories are told and passed down the generations to teach us something. They want us to identify with the players in the stories: In this case we are being reminded that we all are, at times, the man who was possessed by the impure spirit, who was not himself. I believe that today we are being invited to reflect on the question: *Where and when do we experience ourselves as not quite ourselves?* When we get angry with our spouse or children? When we have a strong disagreement with a colleague from work? When we have

a political discussion with people in our family who see the world different than we do? When we feel discouraged? Hopeless? Lonely? Misunderstood? When we are utterly exhausted? Or when we do not feel seen for who we are?

And how can we, you and me, how can we be part of Jesus' healing mission? Jesus' mission was to love everyone, and to leave no-one behind. How can we be part of God's healing power for our world, filled with "impure spirits?" One way to do that is to not pathologize, condemn and judge those among us, who are struggling with "not-being-themselves." To not dismiss and exclude those who are overpowered by forces stronger than themselves! To offer compassion to those among us who feel incapacitated due to depression, or exhaustion or hopelessness.

We can reach out kindly to those who are lonely, helpless, fearful. We can become part of God's great flow of loving kindness, that includes and invites, instead of excluding and judging others due to their otherness. Hatred of foreigners is one of those impure spirits we can tell to be quiet. Hurting and harming others for whatever reason is another one.

I believe this story is the first story Mark tells us of Jesus because it is so important to him that we *get* that we can be part of that caring, compassionate movement Jesus personified and lived his life for. We

humankind are *all* part of that one big family, God's family, a family of caregivers and caretakers! We are part of a community of people who do not exclude those who are suffering, who are homeless, who are confused or afraid. Let us be reminded that *all of us* are on that journey towards wholeness. May we walk it in love and kindness – just as Jesus did!

Amen!