



THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
JANUARY 31, 2021
MARK 1: 21-28
“TESTING THE SPIRITS”

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an unclean spirit cried out, “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!”

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

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.” News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

SERMON

How do we people of the 21st century think about “unclean spirits?”

It’s the same question that confronts us when we read about Jesus casting out demons.

“Unclean spirits” and “demons” were the only words that the gospel writers had at their disposal to describe certain human experiences.

We now have psychological language at our disposal, so, we can bring the ancient experience of unclean spirits and demons
Into post-modern times.



We have the same experience as the ancients, but we now call the experience a neurosis or a complex, rather than unclean spirit or demon. We can use these words without contradicting the scriptures because all the words—ancient or modern-- point to experiences that compel us to act out in ways that are contrary to our best intentions.

“Demons have not disappeared but merely have taken on another form: they have become unconscious psychic forces.” (Carl Jung)

We all know this because we all speak about these experiences:

I'm not myself today
I must have gotten out on the wrong side of the bed
I don't know what has gotten into me
I was out of my mind

When someone speaks about their regretful behavior, it is not uncommon for the person to say, “but that’s not who I am.”

It is both a truthful statement and a false statement.

The person was not, as we say, in their right mind, meaning their usual ego state. But it is the same person, possessed by a complex that lies outside the ego. Something stronger has temporarily taken up residence in the person.

We’ve all had moments where “something” has gotten into us, where we feel out of sorts, beside ourselves. When deeper emotional forces seize us. Primitive forces which are quite definitely stronger than you we are.

Think of a time when you were outraged at someone you love and, in the moment, you spouted terrible words. Afterwards, it seems like you were possessed. “you” really didn’t mean what “you” said.



The church has done its people a grave disservice. For the most part, the church has not educated its members so that they are able to see more clearly what goes on in their own inner life and in the life of their congregations.

And so, the unclean spirits and demons continue their destruction....

In every congregation, we have people with unclean spirits. We have people controlled by their complexes.

A few examples:

At my first worship service in a new congregation, the former congregational council president shook my hand at the door, looked me in the eye, and firmly said, "before you make any decision, come and see me first."

In Jesus' day, they would have said this man has an unclean spirit. Today, we would say this man is gripped by a power complex.

A former council president has no authority in a congregation, yet this complex-gripped man wants to control what happens.

In another congregation, the organist resigned while three other organists remained as members of the congregation.

A process was established so that one woman out of the three could be fairly selected for the organist position. One of the three, who was difficult, openly racist, and passive aggressive, said she would not apply which, frankly, made most members happy.

When an organist was selected, this woman approached the pastor saying she was very upset at the choice.

Puzzled, the pastor responded that she had stated she did not want the job. She angrily responded, "no, I said I wouldn't apply."



She clarified that she expected to just be given the job. And since it wasn't, she continued to foment dissent in the congregation....

The less healthy the congregation, the more unclean spirits take over.

Recently, I saw a meme (**slide**):

We can have gatherings of up to eight people without issues
I don't even know eight people without issues

And so yes, here's the difficulty I have not been able to solve as a parish pastor.

As a pastoral psychotherapist, the client and I make an agreement.

That is, we agree that we both are open and willing to work together on what is plaguing the client.

The client would not have come to me if he or she was not worn out in battling their demons, so some of our time will be spent in naming the demons and then in working so that the grip of the demon can be loosened and eventually managed.

Always, there will be difficult and painful sessions. We both agree that we are willing to suffer through these sessions in order for the person to find healing.

It's not unusual for tension and difficulties to arise between us, but we get through it because we have committed to doing the psychological work together.

There are no such contracts in a congregation. Typically, congregations are not willing to name the demons, confront the demons, or even willing to say there are demons.



Instead, congregations says things like:

“that’s just Dave. You know how Dave is.”

Or “be sure not to upset the jones.” If that happens, people know that all hell will break loose.

Or “well, the Wilson family were founding members,” as if that excuses all kinds of unclean spirit behavior.

Congregational members reveal their unclean spirits by saying things like:

“I was here before you came and I’ll be here after you’re gone.”

Or “we’ve never done it like that before” and then they raise hell when you go ahead and do it a different way.

Or they act out by refusing to share the peace or they share the peace with hatred in their eyes.

If you think about these examples, you understand Carl Jung’s great line, ‘where there is love, there is not power. Where there is power, there is not love.’”

As a pastor, one does not have power, but one has been given the authority of the pastoral office. But that authority means nothing to people possessed by complexes.

For the most part, the church expects the pastor just to take attacks by the unclean spirits; the church expects the pastor not to name or speak to the complex; and the church expects the pastor to remain passive.

Grin and bear it.

The last thing the church wants is for a pastor to cast out the unclean spirits. Because that will hurt someone’s feelings....

Just recently, we saw a particularly nasty spirit possess thousands as they rioted in our capital on January 6th. It was a mob and a mob is always defined



by its least mature members. Mob action is always worse than individual action.

A collective possession did occur that led people to storm cherished space where our representatives and senators make decisions on our behalf, whether we like those decisions or not. The riot led to murder, to the destruction of property, to the crossing of societal boundaries, to defecating and urinating on the floors, to the attempt to overthrow the government.

We're not used to thinking in this way. That an unruly crowd has been possessed. That a dangerous complex has been energized. Yet if we don't think of it this way, we cannot face the fact that larger than life forces do exist and take over people for a period of time.

Please hear me. None of us are exempt from being gripped by our complexes. But I would strongly suggest that a person of faith has an obligation to understand and work with his or her complexes.

Too many congregations continue to allow this demonic behavior. Too many persons with disturbing complexes move into positions of power. And then the work of the church remains ineffectual and often destructive.

It is increasingly clear that younger generations are not much interested in putting up with typical institutional religion that lacks spiritual and psychological maturity.

Another story.

In one congregation, the new pastor was leading the congregation in cleaning up decades of hoarding. Among the items were old school chairs. I found this image under the heading "*mid-century antique chairs.*" **(slide)**



This congregation had something like sixty of these chairs crammed into alcoves. So, on a weekend work day, volunteers tossed these chairs into a dumpster.

Now please note these chairs were not being used and had not been used for a very long time.

But come the next week, the pastor was roundly criticized because these chairs had been thrown out.

It was relayed that one member had been unable to sleep when she heard the news and that another member had vomited.

The pastor probably should not have replied that it was sad that no one had been losing sleep or vomiting over so few children actually attending Sunday school.

Yet another member was outraged because the metal armature could be removed and sold as scrap metal.

One of the volunteers researched that such an effort would have yielded about \$3.97 for the recycling of the metal....

A basic biblical principle is that God is out ahead of us, drawing us into God's future. The story of the garden of Eden ends with God placing an angel with a flaming sword at its entrance so that no one can ever turn and go back.

But unclean spirits and demons want everything to stay the same because any change will upset their influence and power. Unclean spirits despise new life and new growth.

And so, when the unclean spirits and demons start getting called out for hindering the work of the holy spirit, that is when they attack with even greater fury.



In some cases, the complexes, the unclean spirits, go underground, only to resurface and continue their damage.

What is fascinating about our complexes is that they always do the same thing every time they are constellated. Again, a sign that they are opposed to change and transformation.

And, as has happened recently here at CLC, the unclean spirits sometimes appear to win....

To quote St. Paul, "I have fought the good fight," but both Deb and I are tired of the fight. We have given our hearts and souls to assist the holy spirit in breathing new life into this congregation.

St. Paul also stated, "I have finished the race."

That we have not done. The race was cut short and we have been sidelined.