



SAINT LUKE'S

"HEALED"

THE FOURTH AFTER EPIPHANY
YEAR B

DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20

PSALM 111

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13

MARK 1:21-28

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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In today's gospel, demons erupt in the middle of worship in the synagogue in Capernaum. Mark focuses not on the *content* of Jesus' teaching but where greater authority lies. The people marvel that Jesus teaches with authority – he doesn't argue his case by referring to earlier teachers. Power to heal is part of Jesus' authority. The Evil One immediately recognizes the power of Jesus, and challenges it. Jesus addresses the unclean spirit directly, not the man: *Come out of him*. The man becomes...himself again. He is restored to his true humanity and to his community.

In Jesus' time and for centuries afterwards, physical illness was often regarded as punishment for sin; and mental illness was understood as demon possession. Exorcisms are commonplace at that time and culture. There are other exorcists around practicing their cures, as well as Jesus.¹ Some Christian churches still hold exorcism as a fundamental healing ministry of the church. I believe that there are genuine cases of demon possession but they are rare. Most mental illness is physiological and biochemical in origin. Or, the illness of one person can be an expression of a toxic system in which they are caught. Psychiatrists will diagnose a family member who is presented as "the sick one" as expressing the sickness of the family system because that person is the most sensitive or vulnerable of the group. It is easier to define one person as the sick one than to move a whole system towards wellness.

Rather than bracketing exorcism stories as primitive and pre-scientific, I suggest another approach. Think of exorcisms as descriptive not

¹ Mt. 12:27; Lk.11:19

diagnostic. Particularly, how does the illness cause the sufferer and his/her loved ones to feel and act? (“What’s wrong?” “Who can help?”). Fearful, powerless, isolated and likely ashamed, given that culture. Certainly they feel desperate, looking to anyone who seems to promise a cure.

This may help explain the election of someone like Donald Trump. When people feel powerless, they look to a rescuer, a protector and defender. Someone who sees himself as invincible, as a savior, and who diagnoses problems as “*their* fault” – it’s the immigrants, it’s the dreamers, it’s other nations, it’s minorities, it’s women. I will fix the problem by fixing them. Stick with me – I am looking out for you against *them*. Demonizing others can be a way to avoid examining our own demons and the ways in which we participate in the un-health and inequality ourselves. Jesus calls all of us beyond current systems of privilege and disadvantage, beyond former victims becoming the new victimizers, old underdogs becoming the new top-dogs. Jesus changes systems, categories and definitions.

Many teachings of Jesus don’t appear in all four gospels. When something *is* in all four gospels, we should pay attention. In all four gospels, Jesus is recorded at times as asking a significant question before he heals someone. Jesus asks: *What do you want me to do for you?*² Surely, that is obvious? Make me well! I think Jesus asks because he wants people to name their desire, and in naming it, to commit to it. It is the first step towards healing. Do we really want to be well? Or is freedom

² Mt. 20:32; Mk. 10:36,51; Lk.18:41; Jn.5:6.

from sickness too scary? Because with freedom and health come responsibility. The man in today's gospel is healed *for* a new future: so that he can participate fully in his community's life again. Sometimes un-freedom - being acted upon - is easier than being the agents of our own choices. Just as it is easier to complain passively than to construct solutions. As long as we identify as sick or not having enough in some way we place ourselves in the category of powerless, exempt from full voice and participation. Once we are well enough to claim our voice and freedom, we become responsible for participating, for contributing, for giving as well as receiving. We have the privilege and responsibility of helping make life better for others. To be healed is to be given a gift and a responsibility towards our neighbor.

We all have some unhealed things in us. The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen discovered that his chief demon was needing approval and needing to be loved, and he often confused the two. Perhaps our demon is greed or anger, or resentment or envy or struggling with loving our neighbor or ourselves. Perhaps we know that our demons are legion. There are these demons in each of us that know us and that we know because we live with them 24/7. They are not always hyperactive but they are always there. And they resist the work of love and grace within us. They resist healing, they resist trust and faith. We may not really want them gone because then we will be empty. What if worse takes their place?³ Better the devil you know...Un-freedom is at the heart of all of our demons; and yet we also have some fear of freedom. It is the human condition.

³ Luke 11:24-26

There is no magical maturity that will descend upon us or our nation. It is a process of choice and participation in our community's wellbeing by each one of us. How do we disrupt cycles of un-health? How do we interrupt processes of victimization and name-calling and bullying? How do we use social media and technology in a way that promotes health of mind, body and spirit in ourselves and others? In this life, we are all on the journey from sickness to health. We don't arrive at perfect wholeness until the next life – that's why we have eternity. But that need not stop us from claiming the health that is in us now by God's grace. We are healthy *enough*, well *enough*, compassionate *enough*, wise *enough* to do good. It is our responsibility – ready or not! – to claim the health that is in us and the freedom God has given us to help make the world more whole, wise, just and merciful.

AMEN

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