

## Tender Care: A Spiritual Detox

*A sermon preached on Mark 1:21-28 on January 28, 2024,  
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC  
I.*

If you've been following along for these Epiphany weeks, you know we're spending time with the Gospel of Mark. The most abrupt and fast-paced of all the gospels, notice that we're but 21 verses into the story, and we've already experienced Jesus' birth, baptism, testing in the wilderness, proclamation of his central message, and calling of the first disciples! And here, the first thrust of his ministry begins, right in the heart of it all: teaching in the synagogue, on a Sabbath day, surrounded by the religious. He astounded them, that Jesus of Nazareth, "for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes." This authority or *exousia* in the Greek, was generally applied to kings, to those who carried obvious power and unimpeachable place in the world.<sup>1</sup> And yet, authority is what the people recognized in him.

It's what the spirit recognizes in him too. An "unclean spirit," the text tells us, taking residence within a man there in the synagogue. That man wasn't away from the religious space, or cast out of it, but rather was right there within: one of theirs, or one of ours, you might say.

Scholarship and study over the centuries have added to the mystery about this unclean spirit. Was the unclean spirit an actual demon, like some sort of being of which we watch in blockbuster movies who inhabits the unsuspecting body of another? Was the unclean spirit a type of illness, perhaps a medical condition like epilepsy that seizes a person in their mind or body and leaves disorientation and confusion in its wake? Or was perhaps the

---

<sup>1</sup> William C. Placher, *Mark, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p37.

unclean spirit a metaphor for anything and everything that devours us, taking control of our mind and heart and governing our choices – you know the type – fear or anger, lust or hatred, addiction or greed?<sup>2</sup>

I don't know – and none of us save for this man and Jesus know either. As we draw meaning from this story, it seems to matter less what the spirit is than how it responds, how totally it inflames the man, how impotent the man is to take agency over its devastation, how ravaged his personhood is by the spirit who occupies him. As writer Debie Thomas states, “the man has no voice of his own; the spirit speaks for him. The man has no control over his body; the spirit convulses him. The man has no community; the spirit isolates him. The man has no dignity; the spirit dehumanizes him.”<sup>3</sup>

## II.

We may not know the identity of the unclean spirit, but we know its effects. Oh how we know it. The insatiable hunger for more that never seems satisfied, no matter how many items you add to your Amazon cart, or dollars you make as you jump the rungs of the corporate ladder from one big salary to the next, or minutes you spend exercising or cleaning or organizing or number-crunching as you try to perfect your way into peak optimization, or hours you spend working hoping you'll find yourself and your purpose on the other side. The ravenous dependence on substances to take off the edge, to get through the night, to satisfy your pleasure, to fix what you think is broken, to fill an aching hole. The stiff control you grasp over this relationship or that behavior, this anxiety or that experience, all the while fooling yourself into

---

<sup>2</sup> Debie Thomas, “The Exorcist in the Synagogue,” *Into the Mess & Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ*, p85. This sermon of Debie Thomas was especially helpful for me this week: clear, compelling, and searing.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

believing you're doing what's necessary, unaware that the one being controlled is you. Oh, we know.

These unclean spirits aren't just sheltered in our individual lives; rather, they spill out and infect the collective. Oh how we see it. The rampant stain of racism and xenophobia and patriarchy and that only seem to grow with each passing year. The corrupt embrace of Christian nationalism, which distorts both the Christian faith and our country's constitutional democracy by merging our Christian and American identities in ways that threaten both.<sup>4</sup> The embrace of consumerism at all costs, even when it elevates the few at the hands of the many and pillages our planet along the way. The grip our culture holds on our collective attention, stolen by our screens and sold for our dollars. I could go on. Oh, we see it.

Yet inasmuch as these unclean spirits infect our lives and our communities, holding us in a stranglehold we aren't sure we can break, like with Jesus, these spirits always know when they're under threat, when the one that can eradicate them all the way to liberation is near, when an encounter with the holy threatens their host with resurrection. They feel the fear of a caring friend, a thoughtful counseling session, a deep breath, a new practice that drives away the compulsion, and put up a fight for the heart and soul they desperately want to keep. They'll try to fool us with self-deception: "just one more time," "this isn't going to hurt anyone," "you're overreacting," "I can handle it," "it's their fault anyways," "everyone has a thing – this is just my thing."

It's no surprise, then, that Jesus' authority is recognized as he teaches and heals this man. Because for many who longed for God to be near, the

---

<sup>4</sup> Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement, <https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/statement>

expectation was, in part, that the coming reign of God in this world would render the evils powerless. So Jesus not only taught with authority, he spoke to the spirit with authority too, therefore conveying in word and deed that the kingdom of God had come near. “Have you come to destroy us?” the evils ask, as they always do when they recognize the liberator. With a word, Jesus silences and expels the spirit, and they all were amazed.<sup>5</sup> The first spiritual detox, you might say.

### III.

Now Deacons – perhaps you’re wondering what in heaven this has to do with you, and this worship service today where we commission and ordain you for your service ahead. Did the Nominating Committee mention to you that exorcism would be part of the job description?

I kid, but only a bit.

On this day when we ordain and install eight friends to the ministry of Deacons, I think of some of my first memories of Deacons. In my church, Deacon nomination Sunday was the one day in the life of the church where the 8.5x11 folded-in-half bulletin was accompanied by a 8.5x14 legal size paper filled with the names of members. (I mention these dimensions because you should know that within these first memories of Deacons were memories of the best paper airplanes that could be folded, lined up on the balcony ledge, and perhaps kicked off to sail down below... but I digress!) Those long sheets of paper were filled with names to circle, but for many years, I watched my mom pass over all these names and instead grab her pencil from the pew rack to start squeezing in more names on the bottom. *Loree Sumerel. Harriet Faris. Susan Little. Ruth Riddle. Mary Alice Smith. Nancy Thompson. Gwen*

---

<sup>5</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Mark, Westminster Bible Companion*, p28.

*Adams.* That Jane Hull, driving out the patriarchy one woman's name at a time.

I think of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville who wasn't trying to take a stand on ordaining gay Deacons back in the 1990s; rather, they simply knew that God had summoned Troy Burden to serve as a Deacon and "thank God he said yes to that call." That Highland Baptist Church, standing amazed at what God was doing among them.

I think of Darryl and Christy Eldridge, Deacons at First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Alabama, who, immediately following worship one Sunday after hearing that my brother had been in a devastating car wreck, left to drive to Chattanooga where he was in the ICU, the first to find my mom alone in the hospital lobby and blanket us with prayer. I think of the many other Deacons who surrounded my family in the months of recovery, detoxing us from the spirit of fear and despair and aching monotony with casseroles and fresh DVDs and reminders that we were not alone. That First Huntsville, refusing to look away from our pain and showing up time and time again in it.

I think of the faithful witness of our Deacons in the years I've served as your pastor: the first to bless a radical change of tearing down buildings and closing a long-standing ministry for a future with hope, the first to develop a plan as something called 'the coronavirus' began to spread, the first to embrace our Confession of Identity, and the many who - week in and week out - make calls to the lonely, mail cards to the infirm, send texts to the stressed, extend hospitality to the newcomer. I think of my Deacons, who help celebrate my kids' birthdays and remind us of their ceaseless prayers and go out of their way to make sure we know how loved we are. These

beloveds, bringing the fullness of who they are – flaws and fears and all – to serve their beloved church.

In any Baptist church, there is certainly a tendency – and for decades, a model – for Deacons to be like the scribes. To prioritize order and preserve tradition. To remain in the snug box of what we do and how we do it, without ever deviating from that administrative function. To value authority that carries power, and power that carries influence, and influence that carries a church. You know the sort. Deacon friends, it could be so simple to think of your year ahead to serve as a year to show up to meetings and be in the room where it happens and stay clean and neat for duty.

And yet – Deacons, as you envision your year ahead of service, and as you too remember the Deacon models you’ve experienced, I charge you with three calls from today’s text:

**Be like the crowds.** Mark tells us that they were astounded and amazed in the synagogue. Astounded and amazed by Jesus! In so doing, they began the work of the kingdom. Reestablishing the social order where a carpenter’s son from Nazareth has authority to teach and to heal. Bearing witness to the liberation Jesus offered the man with the unclean spirit. Carrying forth that story – though Mark’s Jesus tells them to keep silent. Friends, I charge you to be astounded and amazed in our beloved community this year. Keep watch for the corners where Jesus is at work, liberating and healing and carrying God’s dream for this world into the heart of us.

**Be like the man with the unclean spirit.** (And this means that yes, I’m telling you to be a Demon Deacon!) Our friend Peggy Haymes has a poem called “Leaving Your Bags at the Door,” where she paints a vision of church as a place where you **don’t** leave your bags at the door. Where you don’t shine

up to your Sunday best. Where you refuse to put away the hard realities of your life with you when you're gathering with your church. Where you show up to worship and fellowship and study and serve as the fully-human, fully-flawed, yet fully-beloved child of God you are. Friends, I charge you to bring your Sunday honest, not just your Sunday best, to your deaconing, to meet our people right where they are because they're meeting you right where you are.<sup>6</sup>

And finally – the obvious – **be like Jesus**. Debie Thomas reminds us that Jesus “doesn’t use his authority to self-aggrandize or to consolidate power. He uses it only to heal, free, serve, and empower those around him.... He steps directly into the pain, rage, ugliness, and horror at the heart of this story.... His brand of holiness doesn’t require him to keep his hands clean. He is in the fear, in the sickness, in the nightmare, ready to engage anything that diminishes the lives of those he loves.”<sup>7</sup> Be like Jesus, who when asked by the spirit, ‘what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth,’ answers with his very life: ‘everything. I have everything to do with you.’<sup>8</sup>

May it be so for all of us! Amen!

---

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to dear friend Rev. Alan Sherouse for “Sunday honest, not just Sunday best.”

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, p86.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.