

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn

“Possessions!”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, January 31, 2021

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: ‘If I hear the voice of the LORD my God anymore, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.’ Then the LORD replied to me: ‘They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.’

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Unclean spirits. Demonic possession, it is sometimes called. Not exactly. Probably, not at all. That is not how we might describe such an event in our time. We would most likely think it was a display of some kind of mental illness or some kind of emotional illness, would we not? That most likely would be our assumption. And we would want someone trained in the most up-to-date knowledge of such illness, such as a psychiatrist, to help us to diagnose this person, to help us figure out what the best path of treatment might be. And certainly, that's not at all the wrong approach--to assemble all the latest knowledge, to the breakthroughs that we have had through the years, the drug therapy solutions--not necessarily at all the wrong approach. But I would argue that neither is the 1st-century approach of Jesus' time necessarily wrong. You see, no matter whether you lived in the 1st century, or you are living now in the 21st century, it seems to me that the treatment or approach needs to have a foundation of compassion, understanding, humility, and grace. Without those ingredients, the likelihood of failure rises exponentially. And when you look at the whole of Jesus' ministry, when you look at the way in which he

approached the people that he came in contact with, when you look at the fact that he did a great deal of outreach to outcasts and those on the margins of his society, it was most certainly a ministry of compassion and care, of love and of forgiveness. What is clear, it seems to me, is that the presence of what they might have called unclean spirits, what others might have called demonic possession, that that somehow meant the presence of evil. That that somehow meant the presence of brokenness, the presence of something that somehow violated the love of God or somehow ate away at the worth and dignity of a human being.

So, it seems to me the demonic or unclean spirit can be one of many things which transcends time. It can be a social construct that relies on fear and prejudice, with tragic systemic results such as systemic racism, that which dehumanizes a whole part of the human race. Or it can be something that overtakes us when we are part of a frenzied crowd that is being encouraged with hate and encouraged toward violence and bloodshed. We've seen plenty of that lately. Or at other times, the demonic spirit can be what sometimes is a very powerful voice within that seeks to constantly tear us down, that seeks to eat away at our self-esteem or fill us with extreme self-doubt. And it can lead to debilitating depression, sometimes even suicide, tragically. Or it can be a vicious circle of lies and misrepresentations of who we are and who we have been created to be. It can also be an extreme repression of feelings, of refusal to deal with or believe a difficult situation like the death of a loved one. It can be so many things. Whatever the cause, it can feel like something from the outside has overtaken us, that something has dwelled within us, has possessed us. I don't want to suggest that these kinds of situations aren't very complex and aren't oftentimes very hard to deal with. But somehow, Jesus was able to speak within His context and within the world view of His time to bring about healing and grace to so many. How it all happened is shrouded in mystery, and perhaps it should be. Perhaps we should just leave it at that. But we must be clear as well that not everyone in Jesus's time or context experienced healing and not everyone, certainly in our own time, has the outcome that we might want or that we might desire, especially in this pandemic age in which we are living. We are acutely aware that so many, way too many, have not survived. But at the same time, we are also learning of the care, of the comfort, of the compassion and the love that many are offering to others, especially many healthcare workers. We are aware that they provide love and care for patients, that family members are unable to visit or are unable to see, unable to be there in person. And because of that care, because of that compassion, healing many times results in something that can fight the destructive power certain forces and situations can have on people. We call it debilitating illness or mob psychology. They called it unclean spirits, whatever it might be.

In a book that is written by healthcare professionals of their own experience of compassion and care within their profession, called *Care of Spirit*, there is one story that was written by a nurse named Maurice Magnin. And that is his story of caring for a woman named Mrs. Clark. Now, living in Detroit, Michigan, she was a 76-year-old. She was insulin-dependent, diabetic, with congestive heart failure. She had been bedridden for seven years for some reason. Now, her primary caregiver was her 11-year-old granddaughter, who lived with her, preparing her meals, tending to her needs. and yet, for all her efforts with her grandmother, she was often rewarded at times with Mrs. Clark's sometimes venomous tongue and occasionally the back of her hand. When it became clear that the granddaughter was frequently missing school because of all of this, the case was referred to the local Visiting Nurses Association. And Morris Magnon was assigned to the case. He discovered that the house--when he finally got in, was in deplorable condition despite the fact that Mrs. Clark, when she was well and functioning, had been a

spotless housekeeper. Now, it did take a while and a lot of talk before Mrs. Clark would agree to see him. But she did finally agree to let him in three times a week for 30 minutes each time in order to check her vital signs and measure her ankles. That was the agreement. At his first visit, to check the vital signs and the measurements took about five minutes. And so, Maurice Magnon sat down in the chair and settled in. Mrs. Clark looked at him and said, "Well, ain't no point in you just sitting. Why don't you just get out here?" "Yes, ma'am," Morris replied. "I'll be leaving in 25 minutes, just as we agreed." And two weeks later, she was still trying to shoo him away. But finally, one day she said, "Well, if you're just going to sit here, you might just as well read something to me. You do know how to read, don't you?" "Yes," he answered. "Well, if you were a Christian, you might try reading the Bible. You might even learn something from it," she quipped. "Personally," Morris said, "I like John's gospel. But I see someone's marked a place in this Bible in Proverbs." And he picked up the Bible and started reading aloud. One day she interrupted his reading and she said, "That reminds me of when I first came here from Alabama in '42." And she launched into her story. Running away with her children from an abusive alcoholic husband, living in a shelter, working as a maid, working hard at two jobs, eventually, buying a restaurant and the house she now lived in. And even later, buying six more rental houses, which she still owned and was now renting mostly to her grandchildren. I now, there were up and down days with Morris's visit to her. When she was at her most venomous, it was mostly due, he discovered, to the fact that she had an improper diet for a diabetic. But the good days slowly began to strengthen the relationship between the two. And yet, with Morris, the nagging question remained, why had she been bedridden for seven years and why wouldn't she get up and try and walk? There seemed to be no ostensible reason why she couldn't. But then, one day, a family member whispered a family's secret into his ear. "Grandmama," she said, "was laying on this day bed when the police came to tell us that my brother had been killed. That was seven years ago. We must not ever speak of it, but she hasn't been out of that bed since." Was that it? Well, Morris Magnon concluded right there that he would no longer be a part of this silent conspiracy, and he ventured one day these words, "Tell me about your grandson." Absolute silence in the room. So, he went on, "It doesn't matter who told me, Mrs. Clark. I know. I also know that you loved him very much. And so, I want to hear about how much you loved him." The silence, the refusal all these years. Bedridden for all these years. You see, all of that came together to form the demon within her.

Morris writes that he stayed way, way beyond his allotted time that day, and somehow the message got out. The message got out to the family, the message got out to the neighborhood, to friends. A small group of friends huddled around Mrs. Clark, rocking her and hugging her, and encouraging her to cry it all out. And then the memories began to flow. "Oh, remember the wave in his hair? Remember his smile and remember the tone of his skin?" The stories and memories began to flow of Joshua. They were told and retold until there was an absolute sense of joy in that room. And Mrs. Clark, she began the recommended weight-bearing exercises on the next visit of Morris Magnon. And after two weeks, she could get from bed to chair, with help, taking lunch out of bed. And she finally agreed to home physical therapy. In a very real sense, the unclean spirit had been called out and left her. The patient perseverance, the care, and compassion of this nurse.

On his last visit, Mrs. Clark snapped at Morris and said, "Last day, I thought you might not come." Oh, she was in wicked form that day. "Go on, then. Do what you have to do." And after going through his routine, he said to her, "Can I help you to your chair?" "Don't need your help," she said. "You ain't coming back no more anyway. Just

hand me my walker." And in amazement, he watched her pull herself up with that walker, shuffle through the most magnificent pivot he had ever seen in his life and sit down in her chair. And all were amazed. And Jesus said to the man with the unclean spirit, "Be silent and come out of him." And the unclean spirit came out of him. And all were amazed. Confronting the destructive power of the demonic--brokenness and pain. Confronting it with care and compassion, with attention--careful attention, and love. This is such an integral part of the Christian calling. Healing the soul. Healing the soul. Amen.