

“The Demons of our Time”

Sermon on Sunday, February 4, 2024

Dear church,

Let me begin with a side note about the gospel for this Sunday. Sometimes the side notes are important notes. Simon Peter, the disciple, had a mother-in-law, which means he was married, even as he became a follower of Jesus. We may wonder what his wife told him when he came home and said, “I am following the Messiah!” Perhaps some of the women in our church have some thoughts about that...

This text in the gospel of Mark was one of the reasons why our spiritual father Martin Luther broke his celibacy vow. Why shouldn't priests have an intimate partner when even some of Jesus' original disciples were married? As most of you know, the monk Luther broke from the Catholic Church for any number of reasons, but the separation became complete when he married a former nun, Katharina von Bora. The ring marked a real turning point in Reformation history. He was in his early 40's when the nuptials took place and wrote several times afterwards about the joys of family life and being quite happy with his new domestic situation. To be clear, nobody needs to have a ring on his or her finger. What's more important: we all need deep human connection and close, trusting relationships to anchor our lives. Who knows whether Jesus might have gotten married if he hadn't been killed on the cross as a young man? I wouldn't rule it out!

Let's get to the other aspects of the gospel reading for this morning. After Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, more people come to him with special needs. Several times in this passage, Jesus is said to have driven out demons, which is hard to picture for people in our “enlightened” century filled with science and medical review boards... What are demons? Do they still belong to the world we live in? How are we supposed to imagine an exorcism?

The gospel of Mark, the oldest account of Jesus' life, talks about him driving out demons more than Matthew, Luke, or John. It almost sounds like it was a pastime of his, a ministry focus. Verse 32: “That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon possessed.” Verse 34: “He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.” Verse 39: “He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.”

We may compare what Mark writes in his gospel with similar stories of shamans in remote villages of the world who engage with the spirit world to bring healing or relief to people. It's a foreign world for us at this point. What we know about helping with illness is connected to Aetna, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, United Health Care and sometimes we feel like we need to drive some demons out of those organizations. They speak with different voices! They have multiple personalities! They are possessed - by money! “You are covered,” they say and then a voice shrieks out of the body, “You are not covered!” It's sort of like that these days, isn't it? And coverage is sinfully expensive. Do you know what the full medical coverage for a full salaried

pastor is these days? I reviewed it with Dave Smith last week. It's around \$ 38,000 these days. It's almost double of what it was when I started here in 2007. It's sinfully expensive!

So, 2,000 years after Jesus we have different medical terms for people who suffer from inner torment. It usually falls under the rubric of mental illness. A number of diagnoses are routinely made, and you have probably heard about them, such as schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder, varieties of a bipolar disorder, borderline and more... We have experts with PHD's to treat these diseases, but even the experts and the pharmacology that has been developed, the pills, the clinics, fall short so many times. People suffer, entire families suffer. And we are still only scratching the surface of what it is and where it comes from.

I don't blame you if you read the gospel stories with skepticism. Jesus driving out those forces, completely freeing people? That sounds rather unbelievable. But if that was the case as the gospel writers unanimously say it was, one thing is for sure: it meant salvation for those individuals and families suffering from these painful distortions of the spirit.

Last year, I read a book by PHD scientist and public speaker who suffers from schizophrenia, Elyn Saks. She has all the titles in the world. Her titles start with "Professor of Law, Psychology, Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Southern California Gold Law School." What's different about her? She herself is a life-long sufferer of schizophrenia. She wrote about it in her remarkable 2007 book, "The Center cannot hold." She is also a fabulous speaker, and I will share one of her TED talks on the subject in my email next week. When it comes to mental illness, obviously she knows what she is talking about. Here is what she says has been helpful for her. Helpful approaches include "medication (usually), therapy (often), a measure of good luck (always)—and, most of all, the inner strength to manage one's demons, if not banish them. That strength can come from any number of places ... love, forgiveness, faith in God, a lifelong friendship."

Interesting, isn't it? She shows no hesitation to call her inner tormentors "demons." And she knows that help for that is coming not only from the modern medical world that she is so familiar with, but also from the most ancient human resources, such as faith, friendship, connection, love..." It is where the circle comes to a full close when we look at the gospel for today. The rabbi who healed Peter's Mother-in-Law and who lived a life of connection, he knew somehow how to keep the tormentors of people's inner lives at bay. To heal. To love. To liberate. To save. Amen.