

“When the Devil Speaks the Truth”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Let me begin by saying that I am an agnostic about angels, demons, and spirit possessions. I recognize my tendency not to touch these ideas is shaped by my being a white Protestant from the USA. In my travels all over the world, I have seen several other cultures that have a rich engagement with the world of spirits. Not me. It is not that I don't believe in them; perhaps it is hard enough to grasp an understanding of who God is; other than worshiping my God, I prefer to deal with what I can see and touch. And I live in a culture where we do not feel especially vulnerable to the forces of nature. Our weather is relatively mild. If anything, through science and industry, we have tried to become masters over nature. So the spirit realm does not get much play in my imagination.

I realize, though, not everyone feels this way, including some people in this sanctuary. My wife told me it is okay to let you know that her family, which comes from The Philippines and is strongly Roman Catholic, has a strong belief in spirits. Certain members have inherited a gift to communicate with spirits, and there is a general feeling that when someone dies it is not forever because they will be back to visit you. Since I am agnostic about ghosts and spirits, I told Chris not to feel bad if I die first and don't come to visit her. It is not that I don't love her; it's just that I don't know how these things are done. She always gets sad when I say this and makes me promise I will try or at least not turn my nose up if the opportunity presents itself.

But in this post-enlightenment age, I prefer to deal with things that have more grounding in physical reality. So, I will admit to you that I find this passage very perplexing. How can someone who shares my thinking-- or lack thereof-- of the spirit world find meaning in this gospel passage?

I know some preachers who will make the move to connect the experience of possession by an evil spirit as a way that people in biblical times-- who had no field of psychiatry or neuroscience-- explained mental illness. I agree that some extreme mental illnesses can be hard to understand and hard to control, and even frightening. But I would not go so far as to align the mentally ill with the spiritually unclean. That description can be harmful. I have a friend who was in my Doctorate of Ministry program, Joel. Joel was writing his dissertation on a project he developed to overcome the stigma in his church, a stigma against seeking mental health treatment. Often, people in his congregation look to mental illness as a case of spirit possession, and they try to pray the unclean spirits away. Added to the stigma is the difficulty some families have in affording mental health care. Interestingly, I have another friend from my same program. He was from a different culture and denomination from Joel, but he was also looking at the stigma in his church against getting mental health care-- in his case admitting that you need mental health treatment for yourself or your family brought great shame, and in his church families did not want to lose face by admitting there was a problem. But mental health problems are real, and have a real impact on families; in this case, prayer is not enough. Mental health professionals can offer a lifeline, and in many cases it is they who are the answer to prayers. Further, people who struggle with mental illnesses are not sinful, or inferior human beings. They are **warriors** whose survival and achievements should be seen as inspirational, considering what some may face in a daily battle just to get through the day.

But I do get the sense from the scripture that somehow, the evil spirit had taken away the autonomy of the man possessed by it. Think of the

common expression, “What possessed you to do that?” We might say it next month as we look at the empty box of girl scout cookies, crumbs still at the corners of our mouths, and think, “What possessed me to do that?” Your normally bright and self-motivated kid gets caught cheating on an exam: “What possessed you to do that?” To be possessed is to, temporarily or not, lose your autonomy or self-control to something else. In other words, when you are possessed, something else has taken authority over you and over your ability to respond freely to God’s call.

Authority seems to count for something in this gospel passage. We find that Jesus, teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, surprises those around him, who are astounded because he “taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” And again, after Jesus has cast out the unclean spirit, they murmur, “What is this? A new teaching-- with authority! He commands the unclean spirits, and they obey him!”

In biblical times, angels and demons were believed to be spirits that had power or authority over humans, but they were not powerful over God. So when Jesus demonstrated that he had authority over the unclean spirit, those around him realized that the power that Jesus possessed was beyond what ordinary humans possessed.

Interestingly, it is the unclean spirit who knows-- and says-- who Jesus is before the crowd realizes it. “I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” But even though this demon speaks the truth, Jesus silences him: “Be silent, and come out of him!” Why would Jesus want to silence someone who speaks the truth?

One reason that may be true is something that biblical scholars call the Messianic Secret. Often in his early ministry, especially in Mark, Jesus silences people who say who he is. When Jesus asks Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter responds, “You are the Messiah,” Jesus sternly orders him not to tell anyone (Mark 8:29-30). When Jesus cleanses a leper,

he tells the man, “See that you say nothing to anyone but go, show yourself to the priest” (Mark 1:44). Perhaps Jesus knew there were limits to the miracles he performed and was careful to prevent a flood of people asking him to perform wonders. Perhaps he knew his actions, such as healing on the Sabbath, would claim authority in a way that would threaten political and religious authorities, one day paving the way to his death.

But another reason I see Jesus may have had for silencing the unclean spirit is that when the unclean spirit, speaking the truth, named Jesus as the Holy One of God, the spirit was trying to claim power or authority over Jesus. Naming, we see in the bible, gives power to the namer over that which she or he names. That is why God’s name was not to be spoken and was often replaced with the name *Adonai*, which means “The Lord.”

Many have had experience with people who do not have your best interests in mind trying to name you. Perhaps you have been given a name or slur because of your real or perceived race, gender, sexuality, or your immigration status. When people place names on us that are not the names we choose for ourselves, it can feel like their external words can reach an internal place and even start to possess us. It can feel like a piece of our own power or authority is taken away.

But naming can also make us powerful. The gymnasts who boldly testified in the trial of Larry Nassar, who revealed that over 2 decades he abused 156 girls and women, were able to join voices to make a collective power to name the abuse that happened and hold accountable those who both allowed it and committed it.

We need to be careful, though, about blaming evil on spirits, demons, or forces beyond our control. One problem I have always had with the notion of Satan or a devil is not only that we make a god out of something that is not the one true God. When we name these as the forces that are powerful, we give them more power. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians

concerning food given to idols: “No idols really exist”-- so you can eat the food sacrificed to idols, as long as you know that for you these other gods do not exist, for you follow the one true God.” When I was a student in Beijing, I went to tour the White Cloud Taoist Temple there. While I was there, a woman I did not know motioned to me, and grabbed my arm and urgently motioned for me to bow at one of the statues of gods at the Temple. I did so, with no conflict in my heart because I knew I had no relationship with this other god, because it was not the one God who I worship and adore, to whom I remain faithful.

The other caution I would give about attributing power to devils and demons is that doing so allows us to pass blame on something beyond ourselves for our bad behavior: “The devil made me do it.” When Jesus exorcises demons, he restores the possessed to a place of agency and accountability. This does not sound like a graceful experience. The man was thrown into convulsions and cried out with a loud voice. One commentator noted, “When that which is sinful and unclean in our lives recognizes that Jesus is coming too close for comfort, we resist.”¹ In fact, David Bartlett said, “denial and resistance is strongest just at the point of healing. Or rather, it is just at the point where denial is strongest that the opportunity for healing arises. God’s spirit may thwart the spirit that destroys. Caught up by addictions, passions or compulsions that destroy us, we are closest to healing when we shout loudly that we want nothing to do with those who can help. That is the difficult moment when, needing healing, we are called to resist our own resistance.”²

Whether or not you believe in some kind of engagement of that spirit world that exists somewhere between earth and heaven, let us be clear: through Christ, we have an authority that is more powerful than anything or anyone that might possess us. We do not belong to these forces, but we belong to

¹ Alyce McKenzie, “Edgy Exogenesis: Real Authority” on *Patheos blog*, 2012

² David L. Bartlett, “Resistance and Healing” in *The Christian Century* Jan. 23, 1991 p.74

God. In Christ, may we find the freedom to live into our callings, both human and divine. Amen.