

"I Know Who You Are"
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

I want to begin this sermon with a confession. My confession comes from a realization that dawned on me at about midnight last night. I was on my second cup of sermon coffee. Earlier in the day, I ate 2 birthday cookies, and had a slice of cake and glass of champagne at a frigid outdoor gathering with a close friend whose birthday comes the day before mine. I had been working for hours after that on my sermon. Yet still, nothing had yet breathed life into it. I had explored just about every direction but not one direction revealed itself as the one that would tie us closer to Christ. I had been thinking about the scriptures all week. I had chewed on them together with the Bible Study group Saturday morning. And yet, in no point of the pages I had written, had I found that Spirit-drenched piece that would make the Facebook Faithful say, "thank God I opened my screen today." Maybe if I hadn't eaten those cookies and fed sugar to my brain. Maybe if I hadn't sipped that champagne. Maybe if I had studied more, prayed more, *been* more.

Well, I thought, at least the Stotts are offering the hymns and anthem...

I stand before you, feeling kind of like the scribes in the synagogue on that day when Jesus showed up. Like the scribes, it is my vocation, my calling, to share the word. All my educational training has pointed me towards proclaiming the words the lectionary gives us today and each Sunday. But when Jesus walked into the room and spoke, the people, astounded, cried out, "Oh, *finally!* Someone comes in here and preaches with authority!! Not like the scribes!"

Can you imagine the look on the faces of those scribes when their congregation said *that*? No? Well I can. And I spend time imagining *your* faces as I prepare sermons to share with the church. Who will be bored? What phrase will move this person? Where might I be pushing too far with that person? Will the one who confidentially shared their struggles with me last week see how the gospel is nudging them, the same way I saw it is as I was preparing this sermon? And, most importantly, what words are *worthy* enough for telling the story of Jesus Christ? That question is often a sermon stopper... it's the point when I get up to let my dog out to pee, pour another cup of coffee, and wrestle with that demon that tells me to give up; nothing is worthy of God.

It turns out, you see, that demons actually know who God is. "*I know who you are!* The holy one of God!" the unclean spirits-- or, the man who possessed them-- told Jesus.

Our mainline, Protestant tradition in the US doesn't give us much useful to say about the creatures known as demons. Unlike the Pentecostals, we do not see the demon-possessed

melt before a saving grace in worship, as the pastor casts out demons that might be causing chaotic behavior, sickness, or evil. Unlike Evangelical Christians, we don't have much to say about spiritual warfare and battles between darkness and light. Unlike Korean Shamanism or African Traditional Religions, where the spirit world contains demons that easily enter everyday living, we don't have any rituals that will help carry these spirits away to create wholeness of life. In the Roman Catholic Church, the United States Council of Bishops recently, in 2017, implemented a careful process through which exorcisms might be allowed. Conditions include first verifying that no medical, psychological, or psychiatric reason is causing the person's suffering. The ritual must be practiced to restore balance, and not to create a sideshow spectacle. Elements of a Roman Catholic exorcism may include holy water, recitation of the Gospels or Psalms, laying on of hands, and breathing on the afflicted person's faith.¹

I'm pretty certain that within our church, there are people who have participated in rituals that involved casting out demons. With the richness of cultures in our church and where we live, Christian teachings and practice lie side by side with ancestor worship, shamanism, multiple gods-- in fact, on days like Lunar New Year, our church celebrates how some of these traditions can be held in the same space our Christian faith. Last year, for the first time, we hosted our Indian neighbors for a Diwali celebration on our front lawn, which included a dramatic storytelling of the defeat of the demon king Ravana. For the leadership of our church, there does not seem to be a conflict with these traditions sharing space side by side. Like Paul in 1 Corinthians, we recognize that *if* our faith in the God we worship is secure, then we will not stumble in a pluralistic world that recognizes other gods. Perhaps there are those in the community whose conscience is weak, who would let our interreligious outreach be a stumbling block for their faith, as Paul warned the church in Corinth. But, we figure, **love builds up**-- and our hospitality is an act of love that can and must extend even beyond the boundaries of our faith tradition.

As for Presbyterians in the United States, all we've got to add from our tradition about getting rid of demons is mentioned in the Second Helvetic Confession-- one of the historic faith confessions of our church-- that we are not to do *"Those things which by man's device were added...and used in the Church,"* that are not *"necessary to the perfection of baptism. Of this kind is exorcism, the use of burning lights, oil, salt, spittle, and such other things."*²

More simply said, the words said over a baptism, whether infant, adult, or child, contain enough language to cast out the evils we certainly will encounter on our journeys towards God. You need nothing more-- besides our weekly prayer of confession, which seeks to cast out both personal sin, and the larger sins that are the responsibility of a community. These acts of confession are meant to then shape our lives, so that we as individuals live closer to the goodness for which God made us, and as a people reject evils such as racism and structural poverty.

¹ "Exorcism" on United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Website <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/sacramentals-blessings/exorcism>

² Second Helvetic Confession, 1564, Chapter 20.

Besides that, Presbyterians tend to keep to a strong monotheism; if we grant authority to spiritual forces like demons and the devil, what does that make of our understanding of the one, true God as all-powerful? And if we blame our misdeeds on the devil, where then is our own responsibility?

That's probably why Presbyterian services keep to just about an hour. Without the drama of demons and exorcisms, who is going to last much longer than the sermon, a few songs, and a couple of prayers?

Still, there is something powerful that happened in this gospel story, which we could ignore, but in doing so we may miss some good news Jesus shares with us. As Fred Craddock once said, "Not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in our world."³

The first thing I notice about the man with an unclean spirit is that his condition does not keep him from coming to pray. In fact, there is nothing to indicate he was not a regular at the synagogue. It may be that those praying around him had *no idea* that demons laid claim on his soul. Perhaps he did not know either. But there must have been something in Jesus' words or presence that called forth honesty and led toward liberation. I wonder who has ever come to church bearing something that is wrapped around their soul that needs to be shaken loose. I wonder who might feel that right now. Since we've already established that today, *my* preaching won't have the right words to unbind you, let me ask you what ***you*** want or need to bring before Jesus so that he may set you free?

After all, it is not actually Jesus who first notices the man with the unclean spirit. To Jesus, he may have looked like just about anybody else. Instead, it was the man-- or rather, his unclean spirit-- who confronted Jesus, as if they *knew* each other.

There is an odd familiarity, almost an intimacy, in this knowledge, one of the other. The unclean spirit knew Jesus. And Paul told us that anyone who loves God is known by God. On the one hand, there is something terrifying about being known. You may feel like, "Oh no! They have finally found me out!" But there is safety in being known too: the freedom of having nothing left to hide opens up the door to trust and to faith and to love.

This question of authority in the gospel passage really comes down to love. An authority based on fear can bind us. But an authority based on love can transform us.

Perhaps my mistake as a preacher comes when I put myself in the role of Jesus-- expecting to call forth that same honesty, to amaze people, to liberate and even save them.

The truth is, I am not Jesus. I am more like the scribes. Or perhaps even more rightly, I am just like that demon-possessed man, often trapped by the demons of my own insecurities and anxieties.

³ Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year B*

Having been raised in a traditional Presbyterian upbringing, I do not offer much practical wisdom for combating demons. But Christians have been battling them far before I ever did. Let me share with you a saying from the ancient desert Ammas and Abbas-- the mothers and fathers, Christian monastics who took a close look at virtues and passions, and how these may direct us toward or away from God.

The Egyptian mother [Amma Theodora] said that There was an anchorite who was able to banish the demons; and he asked them, 'What makes you go away? Is it fasting?' They replied, 'We do not eat or drink.' 'Is it vigils?' They replied, 'We do not sleep.' 'Is it separation from the world?' 'We live in the deserts.' 'What power sends you away then?' They said, 'Nothing can overcome us, but only humility.' 'Do you see how humility is victorious over the demons?' Amma Theodora asked.

Unless you are a celebrity hot-shot, there is something humbling in hearing the words "I know who you are." Perhaps those words even humbled Jesus himself, for in the biblical tradition God was ineffable-- too great to be described in words, too glorious to be contained in a picture; too luminous to even be looked at. And yet, here is Jesus, "The Holy One of God," and at the same time so human that he could be known and named, even by a demon. It turns out Jesus couldn't hide behind his holiness, either.

Instead of approaching our demons with might, trying to overpower them, let us instead foster enough trust, faith, and love among us that we can start to loosen the bindings that hold our demons so tightly to our souls. Let us say to one another, "I know who you are," with joy and not fear-- for we are under an authority based in love. There is no need to hide.