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Marl 1:21-28

## **The Exorcist**

Gospel stories about excising unclean spirits can be difficult to hear, difficult for the modern ear; they're disruptive, loud, uncomfortable, of a different time and place. It's a disturbing and all too physical a story that we hear today, this story that occurs right at the beginning of Mark's gospel. We're still in chapter one, barely twenty verses in. We've just been introduced to Jesus, and he's on the move, calling followers and teaching in synagogues, and a person appears, a person with a body that is writhing in pain, a person who is convulsing and crying and speaking unsettling words. It's as if there is struggle going on inside this person, voices battling, making life unbearable. And Jesus orders those voices to be quiet, to come out, to no longer torment that person.

It is an exorcism—and it is Jesus' first public act in the gospel according to Mark. Biblical scholars make a note of that, how each of the gospels bring a distinctive lens, each brings particular slant to the story of Jesus, a slant revealed in which stories are told, and how they are told, and in what order. It is telling, which story comes first in each gospel, and what Jesus does first in public in each gospel. For the gospel of Mark, from which we hear today and for much of this year, Jesus' first public act is telling an unclean spirit to shut up and go away.

Which can be disturbing—as in that synagogue, so also in our worship service, in this lovely sanctuary, surrounded by superb music. Thank you Mattawan High School Women's Ensemble for being here with us today, to hear a story about an exorcism. It seems a topic for a horror movie, not Sunday morning worship. What even is an unclean spirit? How could something ethereal need washing? In other places in the Bible, an unclean spirit might be called a demon—which doesn't exactly sound more accessible. Either way, it's not the way we talk about people nowadays.

The Bible, of course, was written a long time ago. Biblical stories were told and retold by people who brought to the tellings different sensibilities, sensibilities of the time in which they lived. Back then they had different understandings than we do now about bodies and minds and how they work—and don't work. Back then there were no antibiotics, nor psychotherapists. I'm glad we have both now, along with many other advances in health and healing. But I don't think that means the Bible is outdated, or inapplicable. There is a witness for us in this story, a powerful witness for us here today, diagnosis, prescription, and remedy.

When I read Bible stories that mention unclean spirits, and what that might mean for us today, I think of mental illness. The term "mental illness" and its many varieties didn't exist in centuries past, but that didn't mean mental illnesses didn't exist. Even if no one knew that that's what you called it, it didn't mean people didn't suffer from it, so many people back then, just like now. I'll bet every one of you knows someone who is affected by mental illness, some in loud and public ways, some much more quietly. That it is often hidden does not make it less upsetting, the torment, the convulsing, the crying. And when I Bible stories about demons I think about addiction. In fact, the language of possession, often found in Biblical stories of demons, is a language that translates well to addiction and how it operates, how it possesses a person. And when I read in the Bible about voices struggling within a person, I think about the voices that we all have and hear, inside of us, the refrains that get stuck on repeat, our inner critic, and also our id, the voices inside that tell us we can do nothing—and the voices that tell us we can do everything; or the voices inside that tell us we are we are not smart enough, brave

enough, good enough —and the voices that tell us that we are smarter, better than anyone else, the world is beneath us; or the inner voices that tells us that we are not worthy of love—and the voices that tells us that another person isn't.

In all of this I think this story of a person suffering with an unclean spirit is pertinent for us today. This person was experiencing such pain, and society had written them off, as we do, stigmatizing and belittling at the same time, as we say of people, “They're crazy.” “They're crazy,” we say with a shrug, or annoyance, or avoidance, not wanting to see, not wanting to hear.

But that's not what Jesus does. Jesus engages with this person. It is the first thing Jesus does publically, Mark's gospel says, the act a public announcement of what Jesus is about, what he's come to do, the horrific things he will confront, the suffering he sees and ends—and it takes place in a body. From the gospel's outset, we see this conviction of Christian faith, incarnational faith: that it takes place in a body.

When Jesus silences and sends away an unclean spirit, Jesus says to the suffering body, to the one tormented, “You are not unclean. You are not crazy. What happened to you is. What tormented you is.” Jesus's first act in Mark announces that time's up for abusive powers. Time for them to be silenced; time for those who suffer to have their bodies, their selves, their lives, back.

And this gospel story felt even more pertinent to me this last week as I've listened to the radio and read news stories about that trial in Michigan, of the sports doctor and the women, and girls, he “treated.” In that courtroom there was convulsing and crying, there was witness to the pain people experience, so many people in that courtroom, so many people in our world, as a growing and ongoing movement continues to reveal. As I listened to the women's testimonies at the Michigan courtroom I started to cry, as they described their feelings of helplessness and shame, as they talked about their internal voices, repeated refrains of worthlessness. This is yet another thing about this horror show, which is all too real, this is another cruelty of abuse: that it makes the victim feel unclean. And yet more cruel, when the women told others what was happening, society at large shrugged, didn't want to hear, or see, as much as told them, “You're crazy.”

“You are not crazy,” the judge said, the court said, taking the extraordinary measure of listening to every single woman who wanted to speak and live streaming it, by doing so saying to the women, “You are not crazy. What happened to you is. We hear you, see you.” And I think that judge was speaking, as Jesus did, I think she was speaking with the voice of the Lord, when she said to the women, “Leave you pain here, and go out and do your magnificent things.”

I think what happened in that courtroom was an exorcism.