

“Heal Me, Jesus!”
Mark 1: 21-28

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I was taught the rule that you should never discuss politics or religion in polite company, but I'm not good at following it. Telling a minister to not talk about religion is like telling a scuba diver not to swim. It doesn't work. But even though I would happily talk about religion or faith or spirituality all day long, I am very aware that there are still certain topics within religion that even as a minister I find it hard to get away with talking about too much.

Examples of topics include The End Times and the second coming, which then lead to questions about hell and whether that is real or what are the qualifications for ending up there. There is also any passage that seems to indicate Christians need to make particular professions of faith that leave little room for interpretation or questions, or those stories that make people wonder if they really happened like Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, and Moses parting the Red Sea. To be honest, I find these topics as difficult to navigate as anyone else.

The Gospel story we heard today about Jesus casting out the unclean spirit definitely falls into the category of aspects of religion, or the Bible, that make many of us uncomfortable or we don't really know how to fully discuss. At first glance this story sounds a little too much like *The Exorcist* and not the faith we practice.

Jesus calling out the unclean spirit has, unfortunately, been misused and abused in the past. There are places and people that use this story to say, “See, if you would just pray hard enough to Jesus, you will be healed from whatever is ailing you!” There are places and people who use this story to tell people that there is something wrong with them, or that their faith is not strong enough, if they are not healed in a miraculous way by the powers of Jesus.

I believe that interpretation is a completely inaccurate and harmful way of reading this story. I

can also understand how if that is what people are told is going on, or if that is how Christians are depicted in movies or on TV, why this story would not be a very popular one for us to discuss. Shaming someone, or literally demonizing them, doesn't fit at all into our shared beliefs as a community of faith.

But when I read this story, and I come across it fairly often, I hear something different. I hear a story with more of a background, a story that fits in with Jesus' other teachings, and a story that is a little less head spinning exorcism and a little more Body of Christ, no spinning necessary. This is what I envision actually happened that day:

The synagogue was a sacred gathering place—it was where people came to be together and publicly pray. Because it was a sacred place, there were rules about who could be there and who could do what when they were there. Picture Jesus coming into the synagogue and sitting down, but instead of listening to the teachers or instead of quietly praying, he begins teaching. He assumes a role he hasn't been assigned or given. And, miraculously, people listen to him. They turn towards him, curious, uncertain, and they listen, knowing he is breaking the rules.

While Jesus was talking, someone approaches him, someone who is also breaking the rules. This man is described as having an unclean spirit. We know nothing else about him because in that time, in that place, that would have been the only thing that would have defined him.

I imagine being defined as one who has an unclean spirit would be a source of deep shame. I imagine it would be something this man would try to hide, even though all his neighbors knew about it. Folks pointed and whispered. Strangers crossed the street when he walked by. I imagine what courage it must have taken to walk into the synagogue that day—what amount of desperation his must have been facing to go to the place of prayer knowing he wasn't allowed to be there, perhaps seeking prayers for himself, prayers that his life might somehow, miraculously, be different.

This man approaches Jesus and questions who he is, what he is doing in this place. This man recognizes in Jesus a fellow rule-breaker, someone with nothing to lose, someone who might be his last chance. He wonders if Jesus can cure him.

Jesus says to the man, “Be silent!” He is silent. Jesus tells the unclean spirit, this mysterious thing that is ailing him, to separate from the man. The spirit comes out. The story doesn't say that it leaves. It doesn't say that it goes flying off. But in that moment, there is separation between the man and what was ailing him. What this means is that when the people who were present on that day looked at that man, they saw a whole person. They no longer defined him by what was causing him pain. They no longer assigned a label or an illness to him. They saw a whole person, just the same as they saw themselves or their loved ones. They were amazed. They didn't understand what had happened, but they were amazed.

Two major aspects of Jesus' ministry were healing people and including people who were previously excluded. I don't think these were separate things. I think they were one in the same. I think the miracle that Jesus performed, one that is still possible today, is that Jesus helped people be recognized for their whole selves instead of being ostracized because of one thing that defined them.

I believe that Jesus was teaching us that no matter what illness or disorder or condition or unclean spirit you have, there is more to us. There is disease and there are people, and while the two might mingle together, the disease does not define the person. Jesus believes we are defined by every part of us, not just one, no matter how scary or painful any one part may be. We are more than that.

One of the ways I believe we find healing in faith is by liberating ourselves from defining ourselves by what is wrong with us. We are more than our diagnoses. We are more than our ailments. We are more than our pain. I think healing comes when we understand that even when our bodies fail us or our minds fail us, there is still more to us. There is still life inside us. Faith is about believing that God, through Jesus, believes we are whole and that nothing, no matter how horrible it seems, can fully break us down. Faith is about finding this belief in ourselves, and it is also about helping the people around us find that in themselves.

You see, my favorite part about this particular healing story from Jesus is that it happens in the synagogue. It happens when Jesus and the man are surrounded by praying people. I like to imagine that

Jesus was teaching that day about prayer. I like to imagine that the words Jesus spoke that day to the man were a prayer, a prayer telling the part of the man that was causing him pain to be quiet, to release him from pain, to be quiet so that the man and the people around him can remember that there is more to him than that pain.

The synagogue reminds me that one of the most important things we do together as a community is to pray for each other. Prayer is about giving a name to our pain, and then being reminded, through words and quiet and a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, that we are more than that pain, that we are loved through that pain. That nothing, no matter what you name or lift up or what ails you, will make us turn away from you.

Naming what is going on that is causing us pain is an act of courage and trust. I often think that people are afraid that if they name what is causing them suffering, it will somehow make it worse or more real or more unmanageable. But in reality, naming it, sharing it with another person, more often releases some of the power that pain holds on us. We name it, we lift it up, and then we let it go. Or we name it, we lift it up, and the worst doesn't happen. No one leaves or turns away. Instead they turn towards you, arms wide, hearts open, ready to hold some of your sorrow and hurt for you. Allowing someone to pray for you, can bring us comfort and peace and through that, healing.

I experienced this first hand myself a few weeks ago. Many of you know that I had surgery in January, but most of you didn't know it was happening until the day before. I've known this was coming up for several months now, but I was hesitant to share. I didn't want to burden anyone. Surgery on one little ear seemed minor compared to what I know so many of our friends and neighbors are dealing with on a daily basis. But I was also scared. I was nervous the surgery wouldn't work, I was nervous about being under anesthesia, and I was nervous that somehow, by telling people, it would make it bigger than I wanted it to be. It was only reluctantly, less than 24 hours before I went to the hospital, that I allowed my name to be added to our book of joys and concerns. And I'm glad I did because in doing so, none of my fears were realized.

I received support. I received well wishes. I received more prayers than maybe I've ever had. And it carried me through not just the surgery, but through the recovery as well. By allowing others to pray for me, I took away some of the fear that had built up in my head and in recovery, it decreased the pain I was feeling. I knew that I wasn't alone. I knew that I was cared for. I knew that no matter what happened or how it went, nothing would take away my connection to this community. I felt your prayers healing me long before the antibiotics did. It was a different kind of healing, but it is what filled me with strength to face the physical challenges. So thank you for that. I'm sorry I don't always practice what I preach, but I'm glad that ultimately I gave in and allowed myself to receive your prayers.

I believe that Jesus has the power to help us redefine how we see one another and ourselves and this is a kind of healing. I believe that day in the synagogue Jesus reminded everyone that there is more to a person than what ails them. There is more to a person than cancer or heart disease or depression or rheumatoid arthritis. There is still life, there is still love, and there is still hope. I know this because even in the face or the aftermath of death, we celebrate life. Nothing other than life and love has the power to define us. In prayer we offer one another healing by being a reminder of these things.

I believe that everyone lives with their own version of an unclean spirit. It's part of being human. There is always something that causes them pain or trouble, maybe it is big this week and next week it will be small, maybe it is physical or it is emotional. But, through prayer, we hear Jesus tell that part of us "Be silent! Be quiet. There is more to this man. There is more to this woman. There is more to this child. You do not define them. My love defines them. My comfort does. My peace does. So be silent, and give them space to heal."