

“The Power of Love”

Mark 1:21-28; I Corinthians 8:1-13 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be emboldened to
proclaim the consequences of your compassion. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

People have a lot of excuses for not reading the Bible. One of the excuses I hear often is that “scripture is confusing.” We know that there are certain things that become more clear if you have adequate knowledge of the original context and the historical goings-on that prompted the passages you’re reading. But it occurs to me that one reason scripture might seem confusing is that we’re asking the wrong questions. Today’s readings are a good example.

If you read these passages from Mark and First Corinthians and were determined to discover what “unclean spirits” are exactly and whether “idols” are real or not, I could easily see how you would declare that “the Bible is confusing”. There isn’t a clear answer to either of these questions in these passages. Paul himself seems a little confused even: in the space of two sentences he says that “no idol ... really exists,” that “there may be so-called gods,” and that “in fact there are many gods”. The man needed a good editor.

Meanwhile, in the brief passage we read from Mark, there is this “unclean spirit”, referred to by the narrator in the singular, but calling itself “us”. More strikingly, the unclean spirit makes a clearer declaration of who Jesus is than we’ve

seen in the previous 20 verses. Mark has already had disciples answering Jesus' call to follow, but without any of the professions of faith that some other gospels include. But here is this unclean spirit, crying out to profess not faith but fear, because "Jesus of Nazareth" is "the Holy One of God," which it apparently interprets as a threat. What is going on here? If you were trying to systematize a taxonomy of evil beings, these passages wouldn't give you much to work with. There simply aren't clear answers here to questions about the exact nature of malevolent beings.

When scripture seems confusing, we may need to examine our questions. As questions go, discerning the exact nature of "unclean spirits" or "idols" operating in Jesus' time is not actually that useful to us these days anyway. If we can back out of the story a little bit and consider new questions that are more relevant to our own circumstances, we may discover that there is more clarity provided in these stories than we thought. So let me propose some new questions that may be more fruitful for us as we explore these two passages. I would suggest that there are two things going on here that are very relevant to our current moment. The first is the question of how we confront wickedness righteously. The second is the tension between judgment and love.

There is no doubt that how to confront wickedness is a pressing issue for followers of Jesus these days. We do not mostly identify what is happening around us as "unclean spirits" or "idol worship," but if we back up a little and look for dynamics that are functioning in similar ways, we will start to see the commonalities. There are

forces in our society that “possess” people. There are complicated systems of exploitation that depend on shared beliefs, conscious or unconscious, that are contrary to the love of God. We might name greed, fear, and hatred as some “unclean spirits”. The idols of our day are often “isms” – racism, nationalism, capitalism, hetero/sexism; they are baked into our societal structures, providing benefits that may or may not seem related to the ism itself, much like the meat for sale in the butcher shops at the temples of idols in Corinth.

Leaving anyone under the spell of “unclean spirits” such as greed or prejudice is not what Jesus would have us do. The idolatries of our day are even more complicated to confront. On the one hand, Paul says, we need to call them out as false and empty. But on the other hand, we have to make allowances for the effects they have on our loved ones, even as we work to dismantle their power. Simply declaring that racism is stupid so we should ignore it doesn’t address the problems of structural inequity that shape our communities. Insisting that conspiracy theories are nonsense doesn’t help the people whose minds are trapped by them.

So we can draw comparisons between the wickedness in our modern lives and the malevolent forces Jesus and Paul were calling out. But the question of how to confront them is more complicated. This is where we must start to explore the tension between judgment and love. As a general rule, Disciples have been wary of judgment. We often distinguish ourselves from other sorts of Christians by claiming that we’re not “judgmental” like that. There are very good reasons for this reluctance.

Scripture warns against the perils of judging others. We are constantly cautioned not to take on roles that should be reserved for God. But the other side of this coin is that we cannot denounce and reject evil if we abandon our capacity for judgment completely. Jesus could not cast out unclean spirits if he wasn't willing to make the judgment that they were harming the people they had taken captive. Paul couldn't have advised the Corinthians about how to handle meat from the temples of idols if he wasn't willing to make distinctions between the God of Jesus Christ and the objects of worship in those temples.

So clearly, if we are to be faithful to the gospel, we must find a way to name what is good and what is bad. How do we do that with confidence that our judgments align with the gospel? This brings us to the question of authority. The people surrounding Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum that day were "astounded" by the authority with which he spoke, both when he was teaching and when he cast out the unclean spirit. This shocking authority is mentioned twice in this short passage. The source of Jesus' authority, I would suggest, is the same thing Paul suggests must shape the way we address the more complicated systems of evil that inhabit our contemporary world, namely, Love. The love of God is what gives Jesus his authority. The love of God is what Paul insists we utilize when helping each other emerge from the systems of idolatry we're trapped in. The love of God is the authority that makes judgment righteous. We call out unclean spirits, from ourselves or from others, because they are doing harm to beloved children of God. We refuse

to participate in systems of idolatry and gently help others break free because they set up false gods as ultimate powers instead of upholding the sovereignty of God. The authority to call out wickedness is always rooted in love.

When it seems as though division and strife have won the day, as though our feeble efforts to care for one another and learn better ways of being in the world aren't having any impact, it is the love of God we must return to. This is why we band together as churches, to revive our commitment to the gospel and re-fuel our hearts with God's love, week after week, so that we can live in the world together in ways that diminish the forces of wickedness. It is no small thing to follow Jesus faithfully in difficult times such as these. There are many unclean spirits abroad in our land. The power of false gods, whether capital or nationalism or white supremacy, seems ascendant. But we know what love can accomplish in the face of death. We know that hope is not something one measures by reading the news. Our times are as confusing as scripture sometimes seems. But the gospel call to love could not be more clear. Let us love with confidence, refusing to leave people trapped where they are. Let us love with humility, knowing how often God has rescued us from the unclean spirits that took up residence in our own souls. But let us love with authority, unafraid of naming false gods as empty and unworthy, with compassion and wisdom, that God's love might reign. Hallelujah and Amen!