

*“Removing Demons”*  
Deuteronomy 18:15-20 Mark 1:21-28  
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 28, 2018  
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Our biblical text this morning ... is all about Jesus’ miracle of removing demons from a man. And so as I studied that text this week ... I started looking for places in our world where we might see such a miracle ... that miracle of removing demons.

And I found just such a place ... in a courtroom in Lansing, Michigan.

Throughout the week I watched ... and listened to ... of Judge Rosemarie Aquilina ... the judge who presided at the sentencing hearing for Dr. Larry Nassar this past week.

And I found the scene in her courtroom remarkable.

Nassar ... you will recall ... is the doctor who has been charged with sexually molesting hundreds of athletes ... at both Michigan State University and at the USA Gymnastic Training facility in Houston ... a story broken open by good investigating reporting ... done by the *Indianapolis Star*.

Originally ... about 90 of the women Nassar molested were scheduled to testify at the hearing ... but with Judge Aquilina’s encouragement ... more than 150 spoke their truth in her courtroom ... spoke directly to their abuser.

These women ... who spoke of the depression and anxiety and mental illnesses they have suffered ... because of what he had done to them.

And this judge ... this woman who presided at the hearing with such authority ... told Nassar’s victims: “Your words are vital.” She told them they were the strongest people who had ever been in her courtroom. She told them they were powerful and full of potential.

She told one young woman, “You are strong and brave and not broken ... you are glued back together perfectly.”

Through the judge’s words and actions ... her willingness to listen to their stories ... she has helped these young women name their demons ... helped them to understand that their demons needed to be named ... and in that naming and in that recognition ... she helped them take the first steps toward taking away the power those demons have over their lives ... did indeed help them ... with their first steps toward healing.

Some might say ... that what we watched unfold in that courtroom ... was nothing short of a miracle.

Well in today’s lectionary ... which takes place on the Sabbath in the synagogue at Capernaum ... the text tells us that Jesus is teaching with authority. He then sees a man with a demon ... with an afflicted spirit ... and instead of just continuing to teach and ignoring the unclean man ... he addresses the man’s pain.

This story gives us a glimpse of a Jesus who can see right into our souls ... can see what’s wrong in our lives ... a Jesus who can spot and challenge our demons.

And that makes Jesus very helpful ... or very scary ... for us. Because I suspect much of the time we wish everyone would just see what we want them to see ... the external us ... what we project ... the storyline we want people to believe.

We go through life most of the time hoping no one will ever see the demons ... will never try to call them out of us. We even begin to believe the false notion ... that we can best avoid suffering by just getting used to having those demons around.

But then along comes Jesus ... or we run into another human being whose life is full of the grace of God ... and our demons get exposed. Someone sees our pain ... calls the demons by name ... calls them out ... and we are never quite the same.

In his book, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* ... the late teacher and author Marcus Borg ... says that a remarkably high percentage of the synoptic gospel's stories of Jesus' mission in Galilee ... concerns what we commonly call his 'miracles.'

But Borg argues ... they are not miracles in the sense of a supernatural intervention ... but rather in Mark's Gospel ... these healings and exorcisms are called 'mighty deeds' or 'deeds of power' ... and they are seen by those around Jesus as what happens ... when God's spirit flowed through him.

According to today's text ... it was these acts of healing that caused Jesus' reputation to grow ... and Borg adds that it was that reputation that generated an audience for him as a teacher.

And so this morning's lectionary gives us one of those "deeds of power" Borg is talking about in his book ... one of four exorcisms in Mark's gospel.

Now I don't think we should get too concerned this morning about what these exorcisms actually were ... as Borg says it is probably impossible for us ... 2,000 years later ... to understand the worldview of Jesus' culture.

Today we would probably use different words to describe the brokenness that had a grip on this man. But whatever was going on with him ... we can say that he certainly had a loss of self-possession ... that he was separated from his true self ... and that he was separated from community.

But what we can say for sure ... is that Jesus was indeed a healer ... that he was able to see what was wrong ... not only with oppressive and unjust political systems ... but he was also able to see what was wrong with individual people ... how they were being victimized.

Jesus rebuked such evil wherever he found it ... and he was not afraid to speak the truth about what he saw ... perhaps because he also knew ... that speaking the truth about our demons is always the required first step to healing them ... that naming the demons ... is knowing them.

And so if we believe with Marcus Borg ... that Jesus is the decisive revelation of God ... that through the life of Jesus we come as close as human beings can come to the nature and will of God ... then we have to believe God is also a healer ... pulling us always toward wholeness ... and fullness ... and abundance.

And so a couple of the questions generated by this text this morning seem to be these: "What do we know of afflicting spirits within us ... afflicting spirits that we try to carefully control and disguise? And how can this biblical story ... how can the nature of the God we know through Jesus ... offer us a pathway to healing?"

That is to say: What miracle might possibly arise ... what new person might arise ... out of those old wounds that we have been carrying within us for so long?

There is no doubt that Jesus ... both his presence and his teachings ... are dangerous for those afflicting spirits that haunt us ... those things that hold us in bondage ... that keep us shackled ... dangerous ... because Jesus came to make people new ... not just mildly better ... but radically new.

He came to bring justice and mercy ... and transformation.

And so we miss the point of Jesus' behavior in this text this morning ... if we see this healing as merely an attempt to prove he was divine ... or to merely restore the status quo. Rather, the action he takes to heal the man's brokenness shatters old orientations ... and with that action Jesus opens up avenues of power for others.

Jesus' way of healing goes deep. He doesn't just remove our prejudice... rather he calls out the fear that causes it.

He doesn't just treat our alienation ... he names the shame at its base.

He doesn't just name the abuse ... rather he calls out any guilt that may undergird it.

He doesn't just calm our rage ... rather he calls out all the accumulated suffering that has been left behind by the betrayals we have experienced.

He doesn't just make us feel better for a time ... rather he calls the demons out of us ... pulls them out by their roots ... so they are gone forever.

Because throughout the Bible ... Jesus could always hear that beyond all the shouting of the demons ... there was a cry for help. Jesus could always see beyond the masks people wore ... beyond all the bluster. And what he saw were beloved children of God ... children with immeasurable worth.

Jesus confronted evil ... which means we also must confront evil ... wherever and whenever we find it ... just like Judge Aquilina did ... in that courtroom in Michigan.

It is interesting ... and not surprising ... that another judge who watched the proceedings ... said the Judge's words were inappropriate ... he said that it is not a judge' function to get people healed.

But Judge Aquilina disagreed ... she just kept offering those healing words ... that healing space ... that healing time ... telling those young women: "Leave your pain here."

I think Jesus would have applauded her actions ... because so very often with sexual abuse ... or with physical and emotional abuse ... or with ongoing parental neglect ... or with serious betrayals ... or with all the many other things that can victimize us ... there is no one in our lives to help us recognize the demons ... no one to help us call them out and name them ... so we can begin those healing steps to wholeness.

And when that happens ... when there is no one to witness our pain ... and so we can wrongly begin to feel like the demons belong to us ... that they are a permanent part of us ... and we fear that we would feel lost without them.

And so we need the kind of love and respect that the judge showed those young women ... it can free us ... free us to name our own demons ... free us to do the work we need to do to get ourselves unshackled ... from fear and guilt and shame... from the anger and despair of the horrible betrayals of parents, partners, friends ... and even doctors.

When we come to a true understanding of grace ... when we come to that moment when we deeply understand that the God we serve actually loves us ... and loves every other person just as much ... we will understand that God is also calling us to wholeness.

And hopefully it is in that moment ... if we take it seriously ... that we understand trusting in God will not keep us from all suffering ... but rather that we will be accompanied as we step out on that journey to find healing from that suffering.

And once we have that faith in our own worth ... and we begin to heal ... then and only then will we have the power to help lead others to that same healing.

And we can risk that ... we can take the risk to face our own demons ... because of the grace that is poured out ...

the love that is poured out ... by the God we know through Jesus.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, the author Anne Lamott says this about such grace: "It like the faucets are already flowing before you even hold out your cup to be filled."

And so this morning ... may we open ourselves up to the healing we need ... so our lives can be transformed.

That may feel scary ... because we have become so accustomed to those demons. But our call ... as followers of Jesus ... is to instead become accustomed to wholeness ... and health ... and grace ... so that we might someday be a part of a healing miracle for someone else ... just like that Michigan judge. Amen.