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## **Exorcising Demons in Church** **Mark 1:21-28**

I will confess that this week I made a typo in my sermon title that went public before I caught it: “exercising” instead of “exorcising.” Actually, someone on Facebook drew attention to it before I noticed the mistake. The truth is that on some level, I’m not sure it matters, because I personally wouldn’t know how to do either. What I do know is that we all have our demons in this life, and they don’t go away—like in some old cheesy vampire movie—just because we walk through the doors of a church building, where signs of the cross adorn the walls and the people of God are gathered to meet. What I also know is that Jesus *does* know what to do with our demons.

Many people are surprised to learn that there are demons in the church. I’m not. In the first recorded sermon of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus encountered a demon in the local synagogue or Jewish church in Capernaum. Jesus would have been invited to be the guest preacher/teacher that day and likely would have had a sizeable audience—Capernaum had one of the larger synagogues in the ancient world.<sup>1</sup> And Jesus didn’t disappoint. He preached a powerful sermon (literally “with authority/power”), which didn’t mean that he preached hard or got red-faced and screamed and spit at everyone for thirty minutes. He wasn’t like the preacher who looked down at his notes that read, “Weak point. Scream really hard!” It was a powerful sermon because he actually had something to say, something that mattered, something meaningful and truthful. He actually preached the good news of God, and this caught everyone’s attention. It was different than the other teachings they had been hearing. They were used to being rocked to sleep with the rabbi’s sermon or scribe’s teaching, their eyes glazed over and their ears numbed by the familiar theological clichés. Worshipers were accustomed to checking their watches, wondering how long this was going to take, and whether or not they could get out of there to beat the rush of the lunch crowd. Not this day. Jesus’s sermon was

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<sup>1</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 101.

different. It was a teaching “with authority.” It was so different that he not only woke up a few deacons and choir members who usually dozed off during the sermon, but he woke up a demon, that until that day had been sitting comfortably on the back pew.

It was a common practice for the teacher of the day to interact after the sermon or teaching with those in the congregation, like a talk-back or question and answer session. This day, a man with “an unclean spirit” or “demon”—used interchangeably in Mark—approached Jesus after the sermon.<sup>2</sup> The demon in him wanted to know who in the world Jesus was and why he had come to scare the hell out of everyone. Such demons took on an active personality of their own and were distinct from their human host, controlling the behavior of the latter.<sup>3</sup> The demon inside this man was offended, and awakened to the threatening presence of God and the message of God’s kingdom come in Jesus. It must have been an uncomfortable and awkward moment for most of those gathered. The demon that had been hiding in plain sight was now being threatened, its authority and possession over another challenged, and now it was speaking up and standing against Jesus, the guest preacher for the day. Like a good demon, it spoke out against Jesus, something like, ‘Go away and leave me alone,’ and did so by calling Jesus by name. The belief in the ancient world was that to name a demon or spirit was to begin to have power over it. The demon tried to beat Jesus to the punch, but it didn’t work.

Now, I know we are all educated modern people here today, so the fact that we are even talking about “demons” as something that actually exist may offend some of you. The idea is biblical, ancient, doesn’t fit into today’s world, right? And maybe there is something to be said for the differing worldviews of the ancients and today. Maybe people just didn’t know what to call mental illness or disease, and so they just called it “demon,” “unclean spirit.” We may have different names for the same things today, but what remains the same is that we have things that as one preacher put it, “get a hold of our lives and make us do things we don’t want to do” like “addictions and compulsions and depression.” Or there are things that make “you think you love things, or substances

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

or people that are really destructive.”<sup>4</sup> In the end, we still have our demons. And there’s no better place sometimes for demons to hide than in the church, on the back pew, in the choir, under our Sunday’s best. After all, if the church is the people gathered, and people have demons, then any time the people of God/the church is gathered in Jesus name, then Jesus is not the only one among us; demons are, too. Demons need us to play host, and we too often fall victim to entertaining the many demons of life. These demons and devils are many that we possess, or in most cases possess us: addictions, hatred, racism, mental and physical illnesses, life threatening diseases, prejudices, unhealthy relationships, destructive habits, dark chapters of our past or present, criminal records, and the list goes on. We all have our demons. Some we have created ourselves. Others we possess or possess us by circumstances that are out of our control. Ultimately, it’s not easy to shake the demons that keep chasing after us, sitting on our shoulders and whispering all sorts of sweet, syrupy lies into our ears. Some of our demons are personal, individual, while others we share collectively. Churches are not immune. Churches can be host to demons, again, both in its individual members and collectively as a community. These demons love to make themselves at home in churches and prevent the church from focusing on the mission of God. Churches are notorious for being host to the demons of fear and maintenance, which perpetuates attitudes of never changing or letting go.

I’ll never forget the first time I encountered a demon in church. It was a deacons meeting. I had been pastor all of one year, which I naively thought gave me some opportunity to recommend ideas for how the church could engage the community in ministry. One recommendation I made was for our congregation to build partnerships with the two churches across and down the street from us, both of which were hardly more than a stone’s throw away. This didn’t sound like a particularly offensive idea, except that we were an all-white church and these other two congregations were predominantly African-American. My comments offended and awakened the demon of racism in at least two of the deacons. “Demon deacons” took on a whole new meaning at

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<sup>4</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Demon Possession And Why I Named My Demon ‘Francis’” *Sarcastic Lutheran: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith Of A Sinner & Saint*, entry posted June 25, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2013/06/demon-possession-and-why-i-named-my-depression-francis/> (accessed January 30, 2015).

that point. They vehemently opposed the idea and even spat out all sorts of threats to me and to the church if we entertained the idea. I backed off for the time being, went home licking my wounds and scratching my head and trying not to throw up my arms in defeat and write my resignation letter.

Thankfully I didn't give up on those men or that church or myself or God. More importantly, God didn't give up on us. I learned many important lessons that night in that deacons meeting. One is that you can't fight a demon until you name it. Exorcising our demons starts when someone invites Jesus into the church and Jesus shows up with the power of the good news of God's mission for our lives. It all starts with a name.

Last year, my colleague and friend, Guy Sayles, was diagnosed with cancer, in particular multiple myeloma. As others have done, Guy decided to name his cancer, "Frank." Guy says that from the beginning he "began to relate to it/him in complex ways. The relationship was and is complex because he/it is not alien to me, but is part of me--a part that, to be sure, has gone wrong, but a part of me nonetheless. It was hard from me to 'hate' or 'fight' Frank without feeling that I was 'hating' and 'fighting' my own body--hating and fighting myself. I learned that one of the insidious things about myeloma blood cells is that they cannot die, as healthy blood cells do, to make room for new cells. So, I began to relate to Frank as someone/something who needed the freedom to die. I know it sounds like a word-game, but it helped me immensely to think of my journey with Frank as a journey for liberation rather than for conquest--liberation for the cancer cells so that they were not cursed to be 'the undead' and liberation of my body from those zombie-cells so that I could experience new life."<sup>5</sup>

Naming our "demon" is important because it identifies the reality of something in our lives that has the power to control us and manipulate us if we don't give it over to God. It makes it real for us. After all, when we name our demons, it means we are naming them to the one who is also with us: Jesus.

The good news is that wherever demons are, Jesus is. Mark records several

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<sup>5</sup> Guy Sayles, "Yearlong Journey With 'Frank,'" From The Intersection: Reflections On The Ways Life And Faith Meet..." entry posted January 3, 2015, <http://guysayles.blogspot.com/2015/01/yearlong-journey-with-frank.html> (accessed January 31, 2015).

accounts between Jesus and demons. In a few of those cases, Jesus dialogues with the demons. In each case, they know who Jesus is, and even proclaim his power over them. Jesus exorcised the demon that possessed the man with the same authority that he taught. And Jesus does the same for us. When he does, he does so in community. In almost every story where Jesus exorcised demons, the person or persons were restored to community. In today's Gospel, it happens right in the middle of church. I've heard people say and even pray that we should leave all of our troubles, distractions, "stuff," or "demons" behind when we come to church. But that isn't realistic or faithful to what Jesus wants for our lives. It's hypocritical. What better place for us to bring our problems, to name our demons and give them to God and to God's people where we can pray for healing and health, and care for one another by telling God and each other the truth and loving one another through our struggles so that God might exorcise our demons and redeem all of our "stuff"? Frederick Buechner once said that the church should be more like an AA meeting, where people come and share their sins and demons openly. Church should be the place where we find Jesus in one another, where in our deepest brokenness, we are able to find great healing and restoration and by the power of Jesus found in the support and genuine love of other people we tell the demons to go to hell, where they rightfully belong. This is the *authority* that Jesus gives us when he teaches and prays and casts out demons.

Nadia-Bolz Weber, who is the pastor of House of All Sinners and Saints in Denver, CO recounts her own personal struggle with depression, which she named "Francis." She writes,

"Francis first stopped by in my teens and early 20s which was easily written off by my family as me being "moody". But later, when I seemed to increasingly like the same things Francis liked: booze, emotionally unstable boyfriends, and self-destruction, she finally just moved in, turning my studio apartment into a Wilderness. She was a terrible roommate. She kept the place filthy and always told me really devastating things about myself. For some reason, when she lived with me, I was no longer able to do simple things like shop for groceries. I'd stand for far too long looking at the dairy case, unable to make a decision about yogurt. She distracted me so much I would forget to eat and then my parents started to worry. One day my mother Peggy realized that Francis not ever moving out was my problem and suggested I go talk to a nice lady about evicting her."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bolz-Weber, "Demon Possession."

Bolz-Weber says that she finally sought help with Francis. With some medication, wonderful support from family and friends, and a serious commitment to Jesus, “Francis” was exorcised from her life; but not for good. She says that “Now, 20 years later it still seems like she knows how to find me and sometimes she’ll show up, unannounced and stay a couple days even though I’m now into so many things she hates: sobriety, exercise, community, eating well – and of course, Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus. Our demons want nothing to do with Jesus or anything that has anything to do with the real Jesus and the true power that Jesus has in our lives when we give him lordship of our lives. Again, Bolz-Weber says, “I think our demons totally recognize Jesus right out of the boat and our demons are afraid of him. Which is why *they try to get us to stay away from people who may remind us how loved we are*. Our demons want nothing to do with the love of God in Christ Jesus and so they try to isolate us and tell us that we are not worthy to be called children of God. And these lies are simply things that Jesus does not abide.”<sup>8</sup> When Jesus shows up in our lives and in our churches, he exposes and challenges and threatens the many demons that possess a strong hold over our lives.

Just a few chapters after today’s story in Mark, Jesus refers to his mission as breaking into Satan’s house and binding him (3:27). Today, if a demon has set up shop and made a home in your life, your home, your church, a family member or friends, and has you or someone you know bound up in knots, then get ready for Jesus to break in and steal Satan’s glory, for Jesus is in the business of exorcising demons. Jesus gives us the power to tell the demons in our church, our lives, and our world to go to hell.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.