

4th Sunday after Epiphany – 28 January 2018
Mark 1:21-28

Whenever we come across a passage from the Gospels that brings our attention to the unclean spirits, it is so easy to just gloss over them and think of them as something from another era: one of those common themes of long, long ago that really have nothing to do with today. But, unclean spirits, evil, the active presence of Satan in Jesus' time is not something that was just "way back when" but something that our society still deals with to this day.

When I was first ordained, way back in the old millennium, I would prepare families for Baptism in a way that I think really did them a disservice. I would focus with them on the gift given their child in eternal life through Jesus Christ, in the working and eternal presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of their child. I would remind them of how much God loves them and wants them to love Him in return. We would speak of the power of a faith community in which they would receive help in raising their child. We would talk about the wonders of a life lived in hope and promise. It was all very lovely, but something was missing. And it took a room full of teenagers to help me figure out what that was.

After my fourth and final year working with Ask & Imagine, which was a residential programme for Anglican and Lutheran teenagers to encourage their growth in theology and ecclesiology, we had a reunion of as many of the graduates as could come. We gathered in Ancaster, Ontario at the Diocesan Church Camp facility and we spent a weekend sharing stories about how our faith journeys had continued, grown, and even sometimes, faltered, since their involvement in Ask & Imagine.

Through the conversations and activities, one of the young people – an alumnus from our first year in 1999, who has now gone on to become an ordained priest in Ottawa – came to me and asked if it would be possible for her to reaffirm her Confirmation promises in our final Eucharist of the weekend. After we discussed the fact that it wouldn't be "official", as that would require a Bishop, she decided that she did indeed want to re-commit herself to Christ in that way. So, we began a group conversation which was her "preparation" for this renewal of promises. We went right back to the beginning and looked at the Baptismal Rite, which is where all of this begins.

A great deal of our conversation was keyed off on the first three questions the priest asks the parents and sponsors of the Baptismal candidates once they have been presented: do you renounce Satan and all of the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God; do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God; do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God. This group of young people, all of whom had been raised in the church and present at many baptisms, had only a vague recollection of these questions being asked. They had always assumed that they were proforma questions that just led up to the really important parts of the Baptismal service. When we started unpacking what these questions were really indicating, they were taken aback. In all their years in the church, they had never really given much thought to the idea of evil being real, let alone acknowledged, within the church community.

Over the course of a meal and a fireside chat, we had a fantastic discussion about why it would be important to ask these questions at all and what we are supposed to do with them.

They agreed, first, that these “acknowledgement of evil” questions are necessary but must be handled with care. They need to be understood but not dwelled upon. They understood very quickly that if we don’t talk about it, we run the risk of not even really believing that evil exists, and if we forget that it exists, then we make ourselves that much more prone to falling into its grasp. Ignorance is neither an excuse, nor is it a safety net. They also acknowledged that to dwell on it too much would create the risk of becoming too focussed on it. They determined that accepting that evil does exist and paying attention to it *as one of many aspects of our faith journey* was like getting a vaccination shot. It helps prevent you from falling prey to the disease without ignoring that it exists.

One of the insights that arose from this discussion is something that is also named in our gospel this morning: *even evil, sometimes especially evil, speaks truth*. The evil spirit called out to Jesus, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!”

The members of the synagogue were still struggling to understand just how powerful Jesus’ teaching was. They recognized that it was more powerful and carried more weight than even the scribes, but they weren’t the ones who figured out who Jesus was. Even after the evil spirit names Jesus as the Holy One of God, the people, the eyewitnesses, were still unclear and confused.

The genius of the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God, and which tempt *us* to rebel against God, is that they do not always speak lies to tempt us. Often truth is their weapon of choice. A truth spoken out of a place of envy or corruption, a word spoken truthfully but with evil intent, can push a person so far off track that evil can gain a foothold without appearing to be dangerous.

If we live our lives and preach the faith of Jesus Christ but neglect to speak of the whole truth of our faith, we run the risk of allowing others, and even ourselves, to fall into the trap of wickedness and deceit, purely because they weren’t aware that these things even exist.

When we think about Jesus’ ministry and we consider the miracles that he performed, often we hear of evil spirits or sins committed that have created the need for the miracle in the first place. Jesus’ ministry was indeed about forgiveness of sins, inviting people to repent and return to the Lord, which sort of indicates that they were following a different path in the first place. If we consider the lengths to which Jesus was willing to go, and did indeed undertake right to his death on the cross, we must recognize that evil and wickedness are indeed in the world.

The question is then, what do we do about it?

First, we acknowledge it and then we work hard and do our level best to recognize it when it approaches and then fight against it. It is not enough to simply turn our backs on it and pretend it will disappear.

If we knew that a person was hanging around the school yard, trying to lure children into unthinkable circumstances, would we simply tell our own child not to go near that person? Or would we contact the police, speak to the principal, organize the PTA, to ensure that all of our children would be safe? We would educate our children, and also actively work to protect them.

That is what we are called to do when we profess our faith as baptized Christians. We are expected to educate ourselves and our children about the traps that are laid out there in the world, so that we, and they, won't fall into them. But then we also work hard to remove those traps. We join together, as a community of the faithful, to figure out how to help others see the truth and prepare them to be safe as well.

We prepare ourselves, and others, by learning about the faith, reading the Bible, listening for God's voice so that we become so familiar with it that we will know that another voice is not His. We pray for ourselves and others that they too will be safe and above all, we actively practice the one thing that evil cannot stand up to: love. Where love is evil cannot exist.

Where Jesus reigns, evil dies. When Jesus names the evil spirits, they flee. When Jesus envelops those around him with love, evil is pushed out and banished.

As a Christian community, we have been given the responsibility of educating and sharing the great truth that is Jesus' love for all. Just as Jesus' fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee after he expelled the evil spirit from the man in the synagogue, we are called to share Jesus' love everywhere we go, speaking of the truth that where Jesus is evil cannot exist. When we spread the love of Christ, then we are indeed renouncing Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. When we share the love of Christ in word and in deed, we are pushing evil away and hastening the coming of the Kingdom of God in which there will be no trace of evil, and simply love and hope, peace and forgiveness.

We are all called to a maturity of faith that can acknowledge the truth as well as stand strong in the faith that is Jesus Christ – the only Lord, the only power that truly saves the world.