

# Trinity United Methodist Church

January 31, 2021

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## Scripture: Mark 1:21-28 (NIV)

**21** They went to Capernaum, and when the sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. **22** The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. **23** Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, **24** “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” **25** “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” **26** The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

**27** The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” **28** News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

## Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

When we come to understanding and interpreting scripture, one technique or method that we might use is to put ourselves into the story that we read from the pages of the Bible. To take a look around the story from that particular vantage point. It's one way that the familiar stories of scripture can speak something new every time we come to them, by putting ourselves in different vantage points of view in those scriptures.

For instance, how would you feel if you were Sarah, watching as Abraham took Isaac off on a trip to make a sacrifice? What kinds of questions would you have for your husband when they came home and your boy told you what Dad tried to do to him?

David and Goliath is a very famous story from scripture, one that if you've grown up in church, you've learned about since probably as early as you can remember in Sunday School classes. But what if we took on a different point of view in that story? Maybe a point of view of an onlooking soldier? What would you think of this matchup

between the giant Goliath and this little guy, David? What would you think when Goliath fell with just a rock between the eyes?

Or maybe Jonah, another well-known story of scripture. What would be your perspective as one of the sailors on the sinking boat, when Jonah was trying to run away from God's assignment to Ninevah? Or how would you feel or think as one of the citizens of Ninevah, who might have seen Jonah or even interacted with him?

And then, of course, there are the stories of and about Jesus. And we come to one of those today from our lectionary. It's the gospel reading from the lectionary for this Sunday. Where might you find yourself in the story today? Would you maybe consider yourself from the perspective of Simon or Andrew, or James or John? Those who Jesus, just prior to the story (remember, context is everything) invited into discipleship? They're part of the "they" who went with Jesus into Capernaum and presumably to the synagogue on the Sabbath.

Would you consider yourself one of the people in the crowd, amazed at Jesus' authority? Or maybe from the perspective of one of the scribes and Pharisees, the teachers of the law, who the crowd puts down, saying, "Who's this new guy? We like his teaching. He teaches with authority, not like these people we usually hear from." Seems like some jealousy might creep in from some scribes and Pharisees' perspective.

For me, and especially in this particular time of coming to this scripture passage, I find myself identifying with the man with the unclean, or impure, spirit. We read that he was simply a man in their synagogue. Maybe he was born and raised in the Jewish faith. Maybe he was a recent convert to Judaism. We're not told that. We're just told he was a man in their synagogue. I wonder about questions like, how long had he suffered from and with this impure spirit? We're not even told how old he was. How had it affected his life? Was he married? Did he have kids? How did it affect his relationships with those around him?

And what exactly was this spirit? We're told that it was impure, or unclean. A term from the rituals of Judaism, a term that speaks of the rituals that would cleanse people from their uncleanness, not that they were physically dirty, but that they were spiritually dirty. That they were meant to be made pure before God, who is pure and holy. To be acceptable to God, right?

And here, this spirit isn't called a demon, but it acts very much like the impure spirit who inhabited a man in Mark chapter 5. And there, he's actually called "demon possessed." We know that this spirit has a voice, an identity that is separate from the man, that is inside the man, but is still separate from him. It makes me wonder, how many times had the man heard this voice from within, and even confused it with his own? The impure spirit knew immediately who Jesus was. It was threatened by Jesus,

and ultimately ruled by Jesus. I wonder how many times the man had previously tried to rid himself of this impure spirit. I kind of wonder about afterwards. Did the spirit come back?

You see, I can preach about the authority that Jesus has, especially in a world like today, where we don't really know who to trust in authority much anymore. That's where I was headed with this passage originally. But I can testify that I know what the man with the unclean spirit is going through. Though I have grown up in the church, been a longtime follower of Jesus, I have long suffered with an unclean spirit, you might say. From my teenage years ever since, it has affected every area of my life, sucking energy, focus, making my fuse shorter at times, affecting my relationships, and more.

What is this spirit? In part, it definitely has a voice, where it tells me that I'm a failure. That I'm a screw-up. That I'm no good at anything. Times when something in life might go wrong and it's pretty much my fault—this spirit is quick to say, "See? I told you so." This spirit is definitely impure, where it keeps me at times from experiencing the fullness of God. And it is definitely *not* from God.

Suffice it to say, this impure spirit that I wrestle with is what we call today a "process addiction." It is behavioral. It is different from a substance addiction, like to drugs or alcohol. But it is no less sinister. In fact, research shows that it affects the brain the same way that addictions to hard drugs affect the brain. This addiction, this impure spirit, has been a part of my life so long that I've all too often thought that it *was* me. That maybe I am really that screwed up, worthless, and no good. I can't tell you how many times I have prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed some more for God to deliver me from it. Wrestling with my own faith; is my faith not strong enough for God to deliver me from this? Why hasn't Jesus kicked it out already?

And then in my better moments, I'm reminded of what I heard a preacher say one time about the faith of a mustard seed. Jesus says if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, which is the tiniest of all seeds, especially at that point that they knew about, you could say to a mountain, "Be thrown into the sea," and it would happen. But what I heard the preacher say one time is that sometimes when you do that, and I prayed for God to do that within me, sometimes God miraculously moves the mountain. But more often than not, God gives you the shovel and the endurance to move it, shovel by shovel. And he gives you others around you to help you shovel and move it faster.

By God's grace, one of the things I undertook during my time off last summer was to get shoveling and find others with the shovels. Some of them are family members and friends that had been already trying to help me shovel, and enthusiastically rolled up their sleeves and have gotten to work with me even more. One of those is a great therapist that I found, with whom I've been working almost weekly since last summer,

addressing my mental and emotional health, always working on self-awareness. Another group of those with shovels is a group of pastors, pastor friends that I have reconnected with, where we meet weekly by Zoom. We check in with one another on a deeper spiritual level, to ask that question asked by Methodists when Methodism first was growing and expanding in the days of John Wesley—asking each other, “How is it with your soul? How are you doing, *really*?”

And my biggest learning from all of this time, this period of really working on shoveling, is that this impure spirit is not me. It’s very much inside me, but it is separate from who I am and my identity. That impure spirit is a liar. I *am* good at some things, plenty of things, even. I *do* have worth. And it’s not even based on what I do, but rather on who I am—a child of God. And my identity is in Christ, first and foremost.

The second thing I’ve learned is that this impure spirit definitely knows who Jesus is, like the impure spirit in today’s scripture reading. The more I fight with this spirit myself, the more I lose, because it knows the power it has over me. However, I have learned that the more I surrender to Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit and welcome the Holy Spirit in to dwell in me day by day, even moment by moment, the less room that that spirit has within me, if Jesus kicks it to the curb.

But then, you see, this is where that vicious cycle can enter into my life. The book of Judges is all about this vicious cycle in human nature, where we get with God, everything is going great, Jesus is in control of our lives, and then we play that Carrie Underwood song in reverse. Instead of *Jesus, Take The Wheel*, we say, “Jesus, we’ll take it back. We’ve got it from here, thanks.” And I do that, and then that spirit comes right back, full steam ahead, sometimes even stronger than it did previously. I have to intentionally let Jesus in, moment by moment, day by day.

That’s one of the reasons why therapy is so good, because we can let Jesus into part of our hearts, but you know, “wait a minute, Jesus. We don’t want you to see that other part of our heart.” Right? And therapy is helping me expose all of that, so that Jesus can shine His light on anything that is hiding in the darkest corners of my heart.

And thirdly, I’ve learned that I am not alone. The spirit says to me all too often, “You’re a hypocrite. Everyone else has got their act together. You’re supposed to be the one, as pastor, the One who has it all together, and you can’t even do that.” Even preparing this message for today—like I said, I was preparing to go in a different direction with this sermon today, until I felt the Spirit leading me to say, “You need to go in this direction.” But still that voice was telling me, “Everyone is going to think that you’re some kind of pariah if you share this part of your story today.” That’s the kind of lie that the spirit tells me, this impure spirit.

But here's some things that I know and believe. You might not struggle with the same addiction that I do, but you might struggle with addiction. You might not struggle with addiction, but you certainly struggle with the types of voices and thoughts that I've described to you. And you know what? You might not struggle with any of this. You might actually be one of the ones that has them all together. (Watch out for that sin of pride, by the way.) I guarantee you—you know someone who does struggle in these and similar ways.

So friends, I don't share this part of my testimony for sympathy. I don't share it so that you'll feel sorry for me. Pray for me? Absolutely, yes, please. Pray for my family. But don't feel sorry for me. Because another character in the Bible, a person in the Bible I often identify with, is the apostle Paul, especially when he writes in 2 Corinthians about his "thorn in the flesh." There he says, "three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.'"

I share all of this to say that if you have identified with this man with the unclean spirit in today's story; if you have identified with anything I have said—friends, you're not alone, even though you might feel like it. You might feel crushed by the shame. I've been there, and I still struggle with that from time to time. More often than not, actually. But you're not meant to live bound by it. Those unclean spirits, the voices of the liar, the voices of fear—they're loud. They're obnoxious. They are as persistent as ever. But they're powerless against the voice of Jesus.

So therefore, would you listen with me to the voice of Jesus? Listen when He says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who remain in me and I in them will produce much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing."

And be sure of this: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid."

Friends, this is one that I am preaching to myself as well as to you. For, like Paul, "I boast in my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may not rest just on me, but on you as well."

I close with the lyrics from a song by Casting Crowns that captures all of this so well. It's called *The Voice of Truth*, and part of the lyrics say this:

*But the giant is calling out my name, and he laughs at me / Reminding me  
of all the times I've tried before and failed / The giant keeps on telling me, time  
and time again / Boy, you'll never win / You'll never win /*

*But the Voice of Truth tells me a different story / The Voice of Truth says  
"Do not be afraid" / The Voice of Truth says, "This is for My glory / Out of all the  
voices calling out to me / I will choose to listen and believe the Voice of Truth.*

I pray you will also. Thanks be to God. Amen.