

## TO GO WHERE THE DEMONS DARE TO GO

4 Epiphany – B      January 28, 2018

Mark 1:21-28

It's hard to know where to draw the line between sickness and evil when trying to comprehend what makes people do things they do, especially given a number of terrible things we have seen most recently. We wonder if the world is getting worse, or if 24/7 news coverage and public efforts by celebrities, politicians, and other famous people have just brought to light more of that which had for too long been in the shadows.

We heard, on Tuesday, of a shooting in Benton, Kentucky where 2 students were killed, many more injured, by another student, 15-years-old, who brought a gun to school.

A day or two later, a school in Uniontown, PA narrowly escaped another mass shooting when a student was discussing his plan to shoot four of his classmates, whom he didn't like. Fortunately someone heeded the new mantra, "If you see something, say something." A student who overheard the plot, recorded the conversation and immediately reported it to the school, who reported it to the authorities, who apprehended the one planning the act of terror, searched the house, found a cache of weapons and ammunition in his room, and charged the teen.

These acts (or attempted acts) of violence were part of a busy week that has also seen a gymnastics doctor who was a sexual predator sentenced for a long time. Pretty much in this very moment there are still more perpetrators being outed for sexual impropriety.

On Saturday, I (and several of you) attended the funeral Buckley and Scott, who were shot to death by their daughter's 17-year-old neo-Nazi ex-boyfriend. They were connected to All Saints' Church through his parents, who were visiting for Christmas and sleeping downstairs in the house where the incident occurred.

Not mentioned are the huge number of acts of hatred, prejudice, greed, and intolerance committed in any given day, or week, or year that mostly go unreported or are not acted upon.

Why are these terrible things happening, and what is God doing about them? Doesn't God care? Is God powerless or irrelevant? We need some answers, or at least we need to ask the hard questions and see where the discussion leads us. What kind of evil, or demons or sickness are we dealing with?

Jesus' first act of ministry in Mark's gospel is to call out and cast out the demon, the *unclean spirit*, that possessed a young man who approached Jesus. For a long time the words "unclean" or "evil" spirit or "demon possession" translated to me as "mental illness." But is it that, or more than that? This week I read the words of a preacher (and former seminary professor and president) who effectively warned against minimizing the power of evil. His words forced me to take a deeper look.

The preacher [David Lose] writes: *We don't always know exactly how to process "unclean spirit" in modern terms (and certainly want to avoid the way it has been conflated with mental illness over the centuries!), but from other passages in Mark we can easily imagine its impact and effects on the life of the man this spirit holds captive. He has likely become a danger to himself and others. If he hasn't already, he will likely soon be socially ostracized. And we can imagine the distress of those who love him. Anguish over his plight, fear about his future.* [David Lose: *In the Meantime: Epiphany 4-B post, 2018. I underlined a phrase for emphasis.*]

In the light of the tragedies I have just recited; and informed by the wisdom of some great minds who have pondered the problem of terrible things people do, I feel that I need to reassess my old opinions on unclean spirits, and move away from automatically assuming “mental illness” to be the cause of every violent act; for to continue to do so would be about as empty as automatically saying: “We’ll keep you in our thoughts and prayers.” Please don’t be offended by that statement; I am among the many who have told people: “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” It’s never offered as an empty promise; but frankly it begins to feel like a rather sanitized way to try to offer words of comfort in the midst of discomfort. It is trying to fill that empty space for which no words seem to be appropriate. In the presence of sin and evil, we often do not have the answers. Instead, our call in those moments is not “wisdom” but presence. As my supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education used to say: “Don’t just say something; stand there!”

One of the last things I read before I started putting my thoughts to paper this week was an article, “*What to Say When You Meet the Angel of Death at a Party,*” written by Kate Bowler, a seminary professor at Duke Divinity School, who has Stage IV Cancer. Perhaps some of you saw a link to the article on Facebook this week, which is how I came across it. [New York Times, January 26, 2018]

While the article doesn’t speak of demonic possession or unclean spirits, it awakens us to the difficulty that we have entering into those situations for which we have no control, those places where our kind words won’t simply wipe away that which can’t be ignored. For catastrophic illness or death, especially a sudden or violent, death people reach for explanations, often weakly, and sometimes even putting the blame on the victim. (You might recall a story from the 9<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John’s gospel, where the disciples ask Jesus: “Who sinned...that this man was born blind?”) The author knows that friends and family with the best of intentions stumble over themselves asking the wrong questions and, they quickly realize their error: “I watch loved ones devolve into stammering good wishes and then devastating looks of pity. I can see how easily a well-meaning but ill-placed suggestion makes them want to throw themselves into oncoming traffic.” [From the article cited in previous paragraph.]

We have trouble with that which we can’t explain. Avoidance is often our first line of defense. And trying to find *someone* or *something* to blame (*even the one afflicted!*) is probably the second. But I am becoming more convinced that the presence of evil is very real in the world; and whether or not we personify it or call it “demonic” or an “unclean spirit” I believe there is something that can’t merely be explained away. (Maybe we can’t pin *this one* on mental illness.) That is not to minimize mental illness, which strikes many millions of people in varying degrees from bipolar disorder to depression to psychosis. Chances are pretty good that many who are here this morning have dealt with some disorder, such as depression, personally or in our families. And if we are so afflicted, personally or within our family, it tends to be minimized at best or avoided at worst. While knowledge of a mental disorder might offer insight, it does not always give us *the answer*. We might still need to ask: “How might the power of evil be involved?”

Saturday also marked the 73<sup>rd</sup> Holocaust Remembrance Day—a tragic reminder that evil has a long and tragic history throughout history. What was the role of evil in Hitler, the Nazis, Germany, or even the Church that, for the most part, was either afraid or apathetic to speak out?

In today’s gospel, we don’t quite know the intentions of the “man with the unclean spirit” who called out to Jesus and whose approach was at least threatening enough that Jesus silenced him

and drove out the “evil” spirit. When is it “mental illness” and when is it “evil,” and how can we tell the difference? And the answer is: there is no perfect answer except the knowledge that God knows and loves all the persons involved. They are his creation, after all. But God knew that the weakest, the most vulnerable, and those who were most-stricken and most hurt, need the greatest gift of God-with-us. So Jesus came, and was made known in actions like the dispossession of this unclean spirit, so that we would be able to walk through the darkest places and the deepest valleys and not feel abandoned. It is this same God who, in Jesus, proclaimed: “I am with you always....” Amen.