



Religion's Demon – TouchPoint for January 27, 2021

Mark 1:21-28 NRSV ²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

TOUCH POINT

²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried out, “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.”

²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have or being.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to destroy us?”

Let's get the answer to that question out of the way right off the bat. The answer is YES, that is exactly what the Christ has come to do to us.

Does that answer surprise you?

Why? For every empty tomb in your life, that tomb had to be previously occupied at some point in time. For every re-birth of your history, a death had to precede it. And for every time your life has been saved, it had to be lost beforehand.

Death always precedes resurrection.

Look, God may love you the way you are, but God will not leave you the way you are.

You see, to put the question in a different context or in a different way. Do you want a God who will take you seriously? I'm not talking about the kind of God that appears on the “With God, all things are possible” posters. That is an insignificant God, a trivial God. That is a God who's only purpose is to feed my wants and desires. Kind of a steroid shot to my hopes and dreams.

Now, it's interesting, that when Jesus says, “All things are possible with God”, he is referring to the fact that it is impossible for a rich person to get into the kingdom of heaven. And then, we turn that phrase around and use it as verse to justify our pursuit of money and fame and fortune. I believe that's called irony.

Personally, I prefer the saying I recently saw on a coffee mug, “I can do all things through a bible verse taken out of context.”

No, the God I'm talking about is a God that will not let us be. Who is going to continue to fashion, form, and free us to be the people we are and were always intended to be.

It is a God, who is serious about us. Who is better summed up in the poster, “Be patient, God isn’t finished with me yet.”

It is a God, for whom it is possible, to get us to live outside of our ego, our narcissism, our self-centeredness. It is, to use Luther’s definition of sin, a God who will create us to live not “curved in on oneself.”

This is the impossible thing that is possible for God. To create us to live other than as one ‘curved in on oneself.’ A God, who will make it possible to live dis-possessed by the 3 big demons of our lives. The need to be right, the need to be enough, the need to be in control.

Today’s bible reading is about a man possessed by a demon, in the synagogue. It is the first miracle of Jesus in Mark. It is the first thing Jesus does. The first exercise of his authority... and what is the first thing he does with this authority?

He cast out a demon that is present in the synagogue. The location is not happenstance. It is not a coincidence. The demon is alive and well and active... in the synagogue.

And so, I want to ask the question today, and I want us to take a serious look: What is the demon that is present in our religiosity? What is the demon of religion that seeks to possess and control people?

And let’s not get hung up on the word demon or demon possessed. A demon can be anything that possesses you. It can be accumulation, wealth, power, acceptance. It can be competition, score keeping, comparison living. Religion also has its demon. And if we aren’t willing to acknowledge it, we can be possessed by it.

Now, just a couple chapters later in Mark, in chapter 3. Jesus heals another man **in the synagogue, on the Sabbath**. And immediately, after this miracle, the religious leaders start teaming up with the political powers to destroy Jesus. So, there is something to this Jesus, and there is something to his relationship with religion that is at enmity... at odds, over and against.

So, what is the demon that Jesus wishes to cast out of our religious leanings, our religious strivings? It is this. It is the religion of the law. It is the religion that says you do not measure up. You are not enough. You need to do more. Take away that demon, and what power do religious authorities have. Take away that demon. And those who are in power will seek to destroy you. This is the demon that feeds those other demons of being in control, being enough, being right.

So much of any religion, especially on the fundamentalist side, seeks to feed those demons rather than cast them out. They say, “Just say the magic prayer, and you can **control** your eternal destiny. Just do this right behavior, and you will **be enough**. Just believe this proper way, and you will **be right**.”

So much of religion, as it is practiced in our day and age, feeds these three demons rather than exorcises them. They feed the ego, build up the ego, celebrate the ego.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to destroy us?”

And the answer is “yes. Yes! YES!!!” Away with your ego, your old Adam or your old Eve, your false self. That self you are so in love with, so attached to. Away with your desire to prove yourself, make yourself acceptable.

You are accepted. You are loved. You belong. Before you do, say, or believe anything. You are justified for taking up space on this earth. For breathing the air. For living in the Mystery.

This is what is so different about Jesus' teaching from the scribes and religious authorities. Jesus doesn't feed the demon of the law. He doesn't impose a greater burden, a heavier yoke. Isn't that what most religions do? Impose a new set of rules, demands and commands. Isn't that what most religion does? Proclaim, it and only it, has the roadmap to being loved and approved by God.

Jesus doesn't feed the demon of the law. He doesn't impose a greater burden, a heavier yoke.

"Come to me all of you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy."

The yoke of grace, casts out the demons of trying to be enough, right, and in control.

The yoke of grace is "the truth that will set us free."

Grace performs an exorcism on our lives... and our religiosity.

Grace destroys and sets free.

Yet, we are always in danger of making a new demon out of this grace, and the one who delivers it... this Jesus.

Paul Tillich put it well, when he wrote, "We are permanently in danger of abusing Jesus by stating that He is the founder of a new religion, and the bringer of another, more refined and more enslaving law. And so, we see in all Christian churches the toiling and laboring of people who are called Christians, serious Christians, under innumerable laws which they cannot fulfill, from which they flee, to which they return, or which they replace with other laws. This is the yoke, (or demon in the case of our passage today) from which Jesus wants to liberate us. He is more than a priest or a prophet or a religious genius. These all subject us to religion. He frees us from religion. They all make new religious laws; He overcomes the religious law."

This is the demon that is present in our places of worship and lives within religious authorities. And I should know, I supposedly am one.

Grace is not as Tillich continues, "... a new demand, a new doctrine, or new morals, but rather a new reality, a new being and new power of transforming life... it is not a matter of our acting or striving, but rather that it is given before anything we can do. It is being, power, reality, conquering the anxiety and despair, the fear and restlessness of our existence..." ... of not being enough.

It is an anxiety or despair that no religion can ever assuage.

Tillich finishes with this, "Forget all Christian doctrines; forget your own certainties and your own doubts, when you hear the call of Jesus. Forget all Christian morals, your achievements and your failures... nothing is demanded of you, no idea of God, and no goodness in yourselves, not your being religious, not your being Christian, not your being wise, and not your being moral... We call Jesus the Christ not because He brought a new religion, but because he is the end of religion, above religion and irreligion, above Christianity and non-Christianity."

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to destroy us?"

We can only hope so!!!

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

Be Still, know that I am God

You Lord Are In This Place

You Lord are in 1)...this place.
2)...my heart. 3)...my mind. 4)...my life.
Your presence fills it.
Your presence is peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Dwell Among Us

Keep moving and living and breathing in us
Keeping working and singing and speaking through us
You dwell among us...
With all this life I long to see, more of You and less of me
Lord send Your spirit here to work in us

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction

Let Your Servant

Let your servant now go in peace, O Lord
Now go in peace according to your word