

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Epiphany 4B) – February 1, 2015
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Being Freed from Our Demons

In today's Gospel we see Jesus directly, specifically and forcefully freeing someone from his demons, as it were. Speaking about the consequences of being, or not being, direct, specific and forceful, a former colleague of mine told a preacher's tale that goes like this: People in a small village come to the minister to complain that the wife of one of his deacons had been stealing her neighbor's chickens. "Please," they appealed to their pastor, "do something about this." Willingly, he preached the next Sunday on the text, "Thou shalt not steal." At the close of the service, the deacon himself praised the parson. "Excellent sermon," he said as he shook hands at the church door.

But in a few days the people returned. "Pastor, in spite of your sermon, she's still stealing." That Sunday, he got more specific, saying firmly, "Thou shalt not steal thy neighbor's goods." Again the deacon himself was the first to praise, saying, "An even better sermon! You've really got to speak specifically."

But as the new week wore on, the people said, "That still didn't do any good. She's still stealing." The minister prayed for courage, mounted the pulpit on Sunday and declared, "Thou shalt not steal thy neighbor's chickens." This time the deacon objected, blurting out, "Who are you to think you're an expert on chickens? You're not supposed to get so specific. That's not preaching, it's meddling."

Well, the Christian faith is precisely about meddling and getting specific and mixing things together. "The Word became flesh," is the enduring phrase John's Gospel uses to describe the meddling of God in our very lives. And our gospels show Jesus doing this directly, specifically and forcefully, naming the demons in people's lives and in the wider society, and shining his light of love and justice in those dark places.

I recall an encounter I had as a divinity student many years ago. Part of an alcoholism education and counseling course I took involved visiting a number of different alcohol rehab programs and observing various 12-step open meetings. At one outpatient facility, I arrived a bit early and sat in a waiting room. I struck up a conversation with the only other person in the waiting room, a young woman who by appearances, had been through a rough time. She was calm and cordial. After a while, the counselor came in, introduced himself and explained to the young woman that I was there to observe, if she didn't mind. She nodded okay. But in his presence the young woman's demeanor changed visibly. She was now looking quite nervous and agitated. Once in the counselor's office, while both were still standing, with a chart in his hand, he said straight out, "So, you're an alcoholic." He named the unclean spirit, the demon, quite directly and forcefully. And if you name a demon specifically, expect it to shout back. The young woman went on a rant and looked very scared at the same time. The counselor did not let up. By the end of the

session the woman, who had been remanded by the court to this clinic, had come face to face with her demon—her disease—that had just been directly confronted.

A demon (or “daemon” in the original Greek) was thought of in ancient Greek mythology as a supernatural being of a nature somewhere between gods and humans—including the soul or “ghost” of the dead—a kind of attendant, ministering or indwelling spirit that could guide and warn a person. But in the Bible demons were thought of in mostly negative terms, as adversarial existences, both personal and societal in dimension, hostile to human well-being and rebellious against God—evil influences or spirits. These demons or evil/unclean spirits were considered bad because they separate us from God and from our true nature, our Christ Nature, and therefore cause us suffering. In the worldview of that time they were subsumed under the prince of demons—the Devil, Satan, Beelzebul, what have you. These demons or evil spirits were also called “unclean” because their effect was to separate the afflicted person from the community of faith and worship of God. It’s interesting to note, however, that the toxic, or possessed, person in this gospel story is found sitting right in the congregation. In our day, this use of biblical language about demons—evil or unclean spirits—is regarded appropriately as “picture thinking,” that is, as a figurative way of expressing the reality and extent of evil in the world, existing not only *within us*, but also *around us*—and thus with influence upon individuals and whole groups of society. Therefore, such “unclean” and “evil spirits” can manifest *both* as addictions and obsessions, traumas and dysfunctions affecting individuals and their immediate circles, *and* as larger evils that exist within but are greater than one’s own capacity to make things go wrong—evil and unclean and contagious spirits like the spirit of a gang or an angry mob, or, say, materialism or militarism, xenophobia, misogyny, racism, homophobia, and so on. “Principalities and powers” is the phrase St. Paul used to describe these larger evils. Leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. also used this language of the “principalities and powers” when describing the evils of racism—not in any way to diminish the responsibility of, or to deny the complicity of racists; but rather, to point to the pernicious racism and enmity that infects the majority culture, and all humanity for that matter. And like Jesus, who spoke and acted as “one having authority,”—so too, did Dr. King, directly, specifically and forcefully—and he had to get as specific as naming and calling out, for example, Sherriff Bull Connor and his fire hoses, dogs and deputies. And their demons lashed back. And so, the personal challenges that that young woman in the alcohol rehab clinic had to face, *and* our society at large has to face even now with an African-American President—these are challenges to confront “unclean” and “evil spirits,” the “principalities and powers”—first in our own hearts and minds, and then in our wider world. Again—first in our own hearts and minds, for our demons rarely arise from totally outside of ourselves.

Now anyone who has engaged seriously and long enough with oneself in counseling or 12-step recovery knows there’s a difference between, on the one hand, finding out you have “demons,”—that relatively toxic mix of traumas, obsessions or dysfunctions that have shaped the decisions and course of your life—and, on the other hand, truly addressing and becoming free of them, or keeping them at bay. My own demons of obsessive worry and workaholicism are just two that I care to name at the moment. There is a world of difference between naming them and actually exorcising them, as it were.

The exorcising for us is most often a lifelong process, often never completed, rather than some sudden release as we read in our gospel today. Some people are satisfied to know what their demons are, but stop there, having a bit of self-knowledge, but not engaging in the hard work of change. Because if your demons are truly “cast out,” so to speak, whether suddenly or through a long process, you have to change! And if you change, others change. Whether unlucky circumstances, dysfunctional parents, hanging around with the wrong crowd, or some other outside force are the source of our demons, or whether they’re of our own making, once we’ve stopped denying we have them, then, at best, we feel foolish letting them continue to guide our choices and behaviors. But at worst, we feel trapped and stuck in our dysfunctional ways, and are too afraid to risk any other way of being. As Sally Kempton put it, “It’s hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head.”ⁱⁱ

As another former colleague, Elizabeth Garnsey, points out, at least our demons are familiar—“I’ve come this far, haven’t I? we rationalize. I’m too old [or too far gone or too stuck] to change. It’s too late to become someone new. I’ll lose friends, or have to change jobs (or worse, stay in this one and have to confront the problems!). I’ll have to sever a destructive tie, or make a [new] commitment. I’ll have to do something I’ve never done before. I don’t have the energy to reinvent myself, we might think. Starting over is too terrifying.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Recall in a similar encounter later in Mark’s gospel [5:1-20], Jesus has the demons leave a man and enter a herd of pigs who then run down a steep bank and drown in a lake.^{iv} But, as Garnsey points out, “The difference between pigs and humans, if we look at [that] story, is that the pigs, when possessed by demons, self-destruct. But we humans, with our resilient souls, *assimilate* our demons. We incorporate them into our lives and cope with them. We too may be self-destructive, but in our sophisticated ways, we manage to survive.”^v But only a pessimist or cynic would cling to the idea that mere survival is the goal of life. There’s so much more to life than mere survival. We’re created with a capacity to live abundantly. Jesus came to show us how—how to be free from the pull of our demons, and how to turn, and change, and become fully who we are meant to be.

We might identify our problems, but can we change our patterns of behavior? Going half way is to stop short, naming our demons but not letting go of them. But God asks us to go all the way; and yes, that takes a lifetime to work through. So, let us find out what our demons are. Let us learn their names. And let the living God help us break free of them.

ⁱ “*Word becomes flesh, and the chickens come home*” Sermon preached by William McD. Tully (New York: St. Bartholomew’s Church), January 29, 2006

ⁱⁱ Sally Kempton, “Cutting Loose,” reprinted in *About Women*, ed. Stephen Berg and S.J. Marks (New York: Fawcett, 1973).

ⁱⁱⁱ “*Don’t just sit there*” Sermon preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Garnsey (New York: St. Bartholomew’s Church), June 24, 2007

^{iv} The fact that there was a herd of pigs indicates that this was a Gentile (non-Jewish) village. As one observer wrote,

“With the rise of patriarchy and monotheism, the fecund pig’s association with the divine feminine engendered prohibitions against eating pork, the shunning of swineherds, and the fantasy of pigs as receptacles for demons and all that was unclean. The [ancient and] Medieval Jewish, Christian and Moslem worlds denigrated ‘swine.’ Pigs became emblematic of deadly sins of concupiscence. Self-denial, separation of the body from the spirit and the glorification of chastity opposed the pig’s apparent sensuality, which by then had lost all its positive, creative aspect. Even in the 20th century, ‘pig’ was still a metaphor for the lascivious male, greedy capitalist and brute cop, and pigs are the selfish despots of George Orwell’s Animal Farm. Yet other stories, especially children’s tales like Charlotte’s Web, Winnie-the-Pooh and Babe, reflect different attributes of the pig—innocence, sensitivity, intelligence and loyalty.” (Quoted in “Pig” in The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 324).

^v Garnsey, *Ibid.*