

Proper 5B – June 7, 2015
1 Samuel 8:4-20; 11:14-15; Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Our 115th Anniversary: On Being a Community of Celebration and Resistance

In today's Gospel we see Jesus embroiled in controversy. He is attacked for his acts of healing done on the Sabbath. The wonders of his healing and the power of his teaching were met with reaction and a hardening of heart from entrenched in-groups who try to label him a deviant, or even worse, a devil. They even brand Jesus the healer as an ally of Beelzebul. *Beelzebul* is an interesting word meaning literally, "Lord of the flies." This word appears a few times in the Hebrew Scripturesⁱ and by the first century (CE), "Beelzebul" appears to have been synonymous with Satan. Of course Jesus is not allied with Satan (rather, he is being tested just as Satan had tested him earlier). In as simple and direct a way as he can communicate, Jesus gives a couple of convincing arguments that he's not connected with Beelzebul; but he doesn't lash back at their hardness of heart. He simply says, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"ⁱⁱ He then describes his healing ministry, comparing it to disarming a strong man. Healing can feel like a battle—just ask anyone who has had to fight the demons of addiction, for example. We should never underestimate the level of hostility that can happen when we are engaged in redemptive and healing work. Attempts at positive change don't come without conflict, not only opposition from others, but also turmoil and resistance from within.ⁱⁱⁱ

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* can manifest as larger evils that exist within but are greater than just one's own capacity to make things go wrong—evil and contagious spirits such as the spirit of a gang or an angry mob, or other spirits of the times, such as materialism or militarism, tyranny, "exceptionalism," xenophobia, misogyny, racism, homophobia, fundamentalism, and so on. It was with this understanding that when the Baptism service was being updated for The Book of Common Prayer, it was committee member, Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, who insisted on keeping some of the ancient language in this modern service; and so, the following two sentences of renunciation were kept: "Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God? [And] Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" So, the use of the words "Satan" and "evil powers" refer not to some red-horned pitchfork-toting character, but rather to these larger forces within and around us that are often greater than our individual capacity to resist or control, and is one of the reasons we need to band together as a church in order to resist and confront these. "Principalities and powers" is the phrase St. Paul used to describe these larger evils, these spirits of the times. Leaders in our day such as Martin Luther King, Jr. also used this language of the "principalities and powers" when describing the demons and evils of racism—not in any way to diminish or deny the

responsibility and complicity of racists, but, to point to the pernicious racism and enmity that infects the majority culture, and all humanity for that matter.^{iv}

Dr. King practiced this approach and what St. Augustine wrote about when he stated, “Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself,”^v Regrettably though, in each generation – including now – there have been religious, civic and political leaders who have been so sure that they can pinpoint evil and the Evil One *in others* without looking at their own capacity for destructive behavior.^{vi} Demonizing others creates a simplistic and false notion that “they” are all bad, and “we” are all good. And we know the world is a lot more complicated than that.^{vii}

So, let’s start first in our own hearts and minds, for our demons rarely arise from totally outside of ourselves.^{viii} Jesus came to show us how to be free from the pull of our demons, including the demon of demonizing others, and how to turn, and change, and become fully who we are meant to be as God’s beloved daughters and sons.^{ix}

Now, in order to be a community of *resistance* to all that keeps us from God and one another and our true selves—the true grounding for that resistance is for us to be first and foremost a community of *celebration*—celebrating God’s Love in Christ and one another and all the truth, beauty and goodness of life itself. This 115th Anniversary of St. Philip’s Church is thus a time for celebrating our community and all who have come before us. It is about honoring the faithful who built and/or sustained this community in season and out of season, through thick and thin. On this 115th Anniversary Celebration of our Life and Work as a community of Jesus’ disciples, we acknowledge all the faithful souls who have planted generous seeds that continue to bear fruit in our time. We give special thanks for their vision and gifts that have been bestowed upon this community of faith. If it were not for the legacy of these faithful parishioners of the past, this parish in this place would not be able to exist today. We are the spiritual descendants of all those who have given their blood, sweat, and tears, along with their resources—in good times and in bad—to worship and serve God and our neighbors in this city, in this part of God’s world.

This Anniversary is also a time for imagining our life and work together going forward. Already with Vacation Bible School and other youth-focused programs, community gardens and other mission-related possibilities on the horizon, such imagining clearly has been, and still is, an attribute of this congregation.

This space has been blessed by baptisms and confirmations, weddings and funerals. It has held the prayers of countless Sundays and other services. People have celebrated birth and life in this sanctuary, and people have grieved death and loss in this sacred space. The place where you are seated holds the spirits of all those who have sat here in generations past, and you are blessed by the prayers they have left behind, and continue to offer. We in this parish have been blessed by our spiritual ancestors. Indeed we stand upon their shoulders. And with that blessing comes our responsibility to those who follow after us.^x Over time through their various ministries, some of our forebears remembered this parish in their wills, and left bequests—small and large—to support this parish—

including this beautiful acre surrounding us. These givers in their generations intended to ensure the life of this community for future generations.

Yet ultimately, this isn't about land, buildings or money; this is about our faith and what we can leave behind in time and talent and treasure for those who follow us. It's about overcoming our resistance to discovering ourselves as givers. Simply put, we are created to give and we live in a world in which there is always something to give, in time, talent and treasure. In Genesis (1:27) we read that God created us, male and female, *in God's own image*. We are a reflection of God. We reflect God's creativity. We reflect God's love. We reflect God's generosity. It's in our very being. We are created to be creative and loving and responsible and caring; and so, we are also created to be generous. It's who we really are and were made to be. And so as we live and give of ourselves we discover fulfillment in truly being ourselves. There is a felt balance about it. We live; we give, as givers to God's glory.

I am most grateful and blessed to be here with you in this wonderful community 115 years into this adventure in mission, and on this day when we celebrate, honor, imagine and re-commit ourselves to Christ's mission. So, today, on this 115th Anniversary Sunday, may I remind us all: go ahead—act. Be creative, caring and generous. Let us become fully the loving and beloved sons and daughters of God we are and are meant to be. And as another preacher put it, "Remember, you are the spiritual ancestors of future generations of the faithful who will call this parish their home."^{xi} Amen.

ⁱ 2 Kings 1:2-3, 6, 16

ⁱⁱ And he continues, "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come."

ⁱⁱⁱ Beelzebul, Demons. A demon (or *daimon* in the original Greek) was thought of in ancient Greek mythology in more positive terms, as a supernatural being, somewhere between a god and a human, including the souls or "ghosts" of the dead, as a kind of attendant, a ministering or indwelling spirit that could guide and warn a person. But by the New Testament period, demons were thought of in mostly negative terms, as adversarial, as evil influences or spirits, both personal and societal in dimension, hostile to human well-being and rebellious against God. These demon spirits were considered bad because they separated persons from God and from their own true natures and therefore caused suffering. In the worldview of that time they were subsumed under the prince of demons—the Devil, Satan, Beelzebul, Lucifer, what have you. These demons or evil spirits were also called "unclean" because their effect was to separate afflicted persons from the community of faith and worship of God.

The Gospels depict Jesus spending a lot of time "casting out demons." He himself was "tempted by the devil" in the wilderness (and throughout his ministry). And as we see in our gospel today, Jesus was himself accused of associations with the devil: "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." And, in turn, the gospels depict Jesus leveling similar charges at different times against Peter, Judas Iscariot, and the religious leaders of his day. It is important to see that the context of all this in our gospels was for the most part the period during and after the Jewish War with Rome and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem, the dispersion (or diaspora) of the Jews, and the final falling out of the early church with its mother Judaism. That historical context gave the early church—using language from the previous 200 years of dissident branches of Judaism (such as the Essenes, as well as from Zoroastrian, Greek and other possible influences)—it provided the early church, now deeply divided from its mother Judaism, a way of speaking, indirectly, not about the imperial Roman occupation, *but also* about their

Jewish siblings who made up the remnant leadership of the Jewish diaspora. As Biblical scholar Elaine Pagels points out, this language was useful in labeling those described as the “children of darkness” versus us who are the “children of light” as it were. Pagels writes,

“Satan is no distant enemy: on the contrary, he is an “intimate enemy” – one’s closest relative, older brother, or trusted colleague – the kind of person on whose goodwill and loyalty the well-being of family and society depends, but one who turns unexpectedly hostile, jealous and dangerous” (See Elaine Pagels: <http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/Pagels99.pdf#search=%22Elaine%20Pagels%20Satan%22>)

^{iv} 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, Sheriff Bull Connor and his fire hoses, dogs and deputies. And their demons, as it were, lashed back.

Again, Jesus, on the one hand, uses the language of demons, and in this particular controversy where he himself is demonized by others, he cuts the issue, as it were—as in Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts where when this incident is described, he adds, “Whoever is not with me is against me” (Matthew 12:30; Luke 11:23) —thus setting up the dispute with his own family who have come to try to curb his controversial public work fearing he had gone too far. But, on the other hand, in today’s reading from Mark, Jesus does not lash back at those who accuse him of being in league with Satan/Beelzebul. Taken together, Jesus cuts the issue calling them to choose while at the same time loving his enemies, thus leaving them room to make the right choices regarding how they would live their lives in relation to the radical wideness of his mercy.

^v Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, *A Passion For the Possible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 22. And a similar message from the Buddhist tradition states, “It is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles. Then the victory is yours. It cannot be taken from you, not by angels or by demons, heaven or hell.”

^{vi} This reminds me of the statement made by former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan a few years ago at a conference [sponsored by Trinity Church in New York] at which the speakers were asked to “name evil,” something that politicians and evangelists seem so able to do. Annan said, “If we are intent on naming evil...let us name it intolerance. Let us name it as exclusion. Let us name it as a false assumption that we have nothing to learn from beliefs and traditions different from our own” (Kofi Annan, speech delivered to the National Conference of the Trinity Institute (New York: Trinity Church, May 2, 2004)). Because we have this Satan name-calling in the heart of our Scriptures, that’s often just enough reason for Christians to keep using this vocabulary as a “religious interpretation of *human* conflict – between those believed to be ‘on God’s side’ and those accused of being in league with the devil” as Elaine Pagels put it. Pagels further states, “the struggle within the Christian tradition [has long been] between the profoundly human view that ‘otherness’ is evil and the words and example of Jesus: that reconciliation is divine.” - Ibid., Pagels. It’s amazing how much demonizing language flows through the political and religious rhetoric of our day across nations and faith traditions and political divides. And just so we don’t feel left out, just listen to the Rev. Pat Robertson demonizing us Episcopalians: “[The 700 Club, January 14, 1991:] You say you’re supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and this, that, and the other thing. Nonsense. I don’t have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrists.” Whoa!

^{vii} Conversely, it bears reminding what William Sloane Coffin stated, “[if we love the good,] we have to hate evil; else we’re sentimental. But if we hate evil more than we love the good, we just become damn good haters, and of those the world already has too many” (William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 20). Helen Keller put it this way: “It is wonderful how much time good people spend fighting the devil. If they would only expend the same amount of energy loving their fellow [human beings], the devil would die in his own tracks of [discontented boredom] ennui” (Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*, Part III, Chapter V. She uses the word ennui instead of discontented boredom).

^{viii} And 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," as it were—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 at least keeping them at bay. As I've mentioned before, my own demons of obsessive worry and workaholism are just two that I care to name at the moment. But there is a world of difference between naming them and actually exorcising them, as it were. We can feel trapped and stuck in our dysfunctional ways even if we know what those ways are, 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."^{viii} The exorcising for us is most often a lifelong process, often never completed, rather than some sudden release as we read in the gospels. 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!^{viii} 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 may take a lifetime to work through; but God gives us liberation even as we continue the work. 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.

^{ix} Finally, in our gospel reading we hear Jesus say, "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" What do we make of this? Well, if the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Forgiveness, then if you so blaspheme the Holy Spirit and, in essence call it Evil as is the context of this passage in which Jesus is accused of healing as an agent of "Beelzebul," you are calling the Holy Spirit the very opposite of what it is, and leave only a closed heart and mind. As Frederick Buechner put it, "Despair has been called the unforgivable sin—not presumably because God refuses to forgive it but because it despairs of the possibility of being forgiven"—or of forgiving others—just as if you want to "blaspheme" the Law of Gravity you can always step out a fourth-story window (see Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 19).

Michael R. Burch takes this a step further: "The much-feared "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" is nonsensical, because according to the Bible and in actual experience, no one knows the mind of God. How can we blaspheme what we can't possibly understand? Do men punish ants because they have incorrect thoughts about us? And besides, anyone who studies the history of the early Christian church can easily understand the origin of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit." According to the New Testament, the various sects of early Christianity hated each other bitterly and believed wildly different things. Thus, they wanted to be able to excommunicate each other, and worse. (Saint Paul said that he wished the disciples of Saint James would emasculate themselves.) Once Christians had invented the "unforgivable sin," they had carte blanche to damn each other to "hell" in the name of God. Pretty soon they were burning each other's books, and before long they were burning the *writers* (i.e., each other) at the stake. No fate was too horrible for "heretics" who had committed "blasphemy." But of course whichever con artists happened to be in power at the time determined what constituted "blasphemy." - from The Heretical Poets: the Greatest Heretics?

^x Now, I didn't know quite when to do this, but I figured today was an appropriate time as any to say it to you the living—it says on p. 445 in our Book of Common prayer, "The Minister of the Congregation is directed to instruct the people, from time to time, about the duty of...all persons to make wills, while they are in health, arranging for the disposal of their temporal goods, not neglecting, if they are able, to leave bequests for religious and charitable uses."

^{xi} Ted Vorhees, "*Spiritual Ancestors of Future Generations*" (Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts, 2009)