

I Know Who You Are

4th Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B), January 28, 2024

Famous, indeed, is one who can make demons flee. So, too, is one who can teach with authority – authority so great that even the demons and scribes (!) respect it. Given what he did and said in today's gospel passage, I bet everyone in the region knew Jesus's name before the day was out, and knew what he could do.

Scholars call these events signs of power. Whether it is in healing, calling disciples, casting out demons (that is, unclean spirits), turning water into wine or a five loaves and two fishes into bushels of each. they are the ways in which Jesus most often and most easily got people's attention. How else would they know that they could trust what he had to say unless he showed them that he could help them? Good luck teaching them the Parable of the Sower if you haven't already given them proof that you know how to sow and reap, for example. Signs of power readily seen make words of wisdom easier to hear. He could not do these signs, everyone from Pharisees to demons lets us know, if he were not filled with the power of the Spirit. He could not do what he does, that is, if he were not truly the Holy One of God.

Today's gospel's demon, or unclean spirit, knows this. How it knows this, we are not told. We are simply told that it does. They all do – the unclean spirits, that is. There must be some kind of prep school in hell for aspiring demons that teaches them what they need to know once they get up into the real world, and whom and what to fear. The Holy One of God – yeah, if you come across that one, O demons, be afraid. Be very afraid. How will we know? O, you'll know, the demon-instructors said. You'll know by the light in their eyes, the authority in their words and how they carry themselves. You can tell those who are truly good and strong by the way

they move among people – the very opposite of how you do it, demons. They make people happy, relaxed, and relieved just by showing up. You, by contrast, make them anxious, self-doubting, and afraid.

That, of course, is why it has the man it possesses say, “I know who you are,” the moment the man lays eyes on Jesus, before Jesus has a chance to do or say anything in his presence. The unclean spirit just...knows. Knows and fears. “Have you come to destroy us?” it asks Jesus. Oh, baby, let me count the ways and means. Of course he has, and the demons know that, too. So he straightway rebukes that demon, that spirit of filth, casts it out of the person it’s en-filthing, and waits to make sure the fellow is alright, all while the people rejoice. Now they all know who he is.

What’s more, they know what he brings. Peace. Peace of mind, peace of heart, peace in the community in whom one who suffered suffers no more. Its silence, the absence of noise and strife, of distraction and dissembling, is wondrous and surprising. It is the calm after a rain and during a snow, or the cold shock of a bright-sun morning after it snows. It is a heart at peace with itself. It is a mind and a body no longer being insulted or abused. Survivors of illness or trauma, displacement or abuse, even war and flight, get to know this feeling well, if they are lucky. Just to walk between the moon and stars without fear and without being hurt, insulted, hated-on or lied-to can be peace enough, if the road before were stony enough. Such peace gives us the chance and the freedom to finally stop, in Terry McMillan’s famous phrase, waiting to exhale.

The first time I preached to you on this gospel was in late January 2021. It was the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany, the 1st after Inauguration Day (1/20/21), and the 3rd after Insurrection Day (1/6/21). By then we, as a nation and a people, thought we could at last exhale, breathe free. We had breathed out the demon, and breathed in hope and peace. Peace of mind, and civil peace to boot; now, back to business. We hoped,

and I nigh on believed, it would last – much as the people of Capernaum, and the demon-free man not least, hoped and believed it would last.

Not so much as to become complacent, or cease the ceaseless vigil against the return of divisive, demonic evil. But enough to breathe free air as, for the foreseeable future, free people. We had realized by then that the arc of the history of this country must be bent toward justice – that it would not bend itself – but we also realized that we could do it. We could, working together across the miles and in our millions, defend truth and integrity on purpose. We could drive out an unclean spirit, even if we could not easily undo the damage it had done.

Yet evil dethroned is not evil defeated, evil indicted is not (yet) evil convicted, and evil convicted is not evil remorseful or repentant, and like as not never will be. Wise then, is the nation and people that guard themselves against its return. Think of the people in Capernaum. They'd seen their demon leave, watched the spirit of filth and defilement depart, heard it wail and rage before losing its voice forever and leaving the one it had afflicted at peace. That uncleanness might come back, sure, but for the time being, it was gone. The task then became to care for its victims and heal the wounds it caused. Mindful of Mark Twain's observation that "It is easier to fool people than convince them that they've been fooled," the people of Capernaum knew that this would be no easy task.

Yet they knew it was a necessary one, and a good one. One of the reasons why we need teachers who can teach with authority, knowing what they need to know and also how to use it well, is because of that. Who knows but that the man afflicted with the unclean spirit didn't get attached to it, and missed it once it was gone? Who knows but that he might've invited it back, if he were not properly healed? Who knows but that it might have learned to lie so well that it convinced the man he was better off

with it living within him and poisoning his mind, all just because it didn't want to be sent back to the hell where it belonged. Those touched by demons stay touched, as the saying goes. Capernaum knew this, and knew they had to help this man. Perhaps we can learn something from them in this. Those among us whom unclean spirits even now benight, besot, and bewitch may need a lifetime of healing, if ever they are set free. We have to help them, as the people of Capernaum helped him. He was, they knew, living, in a whole new world, and it wasn't easy. The Man from Galilee did his part. Now, we must do ours.

Not that it's easy. Exorcising such demons requires far more than the traditional laying-on of hands and invoking the possessor in its own true name, saying the ritual prayer and bidding the unclean be gone. It requires even more than the bell, book, and candle used to mark the end of an excommunication. That's the rite the medieval church performed when it decided that someone's behavior had been so extreme that they were to be considered dead from here on out. "Curced in kirc an sal ai be wid candil, boke, and bell" went the saying in the 1300s; "Cursed in church and e'er shall be, with candle, book, and bell." The candle is snuffed, the book slammed closed, and a bell tolled so that all could hear: on this one, we give up. Until they choose to repent and be healed, or heal themselves, they cannot return among us. Let them be to us as the unclean spirits of old: silent and gone. Get lost, demon; as Jesus said, "Hold thy peace." We're done here – and so are you.

No, it takes more than that to help people overcome mental illness or addiction, and we're never sure that today's triumph won't fall to tomorrow's relapse. As with the person, so with the people. Whatever possesses so many of our fellows to follow leaders of hatred and deceit does not seem easily cast off by loudly saying, "Be gone!" This is so even when we say it in the name of the God who is love or the love that

outlasts death. This is so even when we say it in the name of compassion and liberty, mercy and freedom,. Demons leave behind “grief, desolation, disturbance of soul and clouds of the mind” when they go. Capernaum knew this. Now, we know this. It takes more than a moment’s sign of power and rebuke to truly set people free.

Only the truth can do that – set us free. Similarly, only the right medicine can help a body heal, or a mind. Lies and snake oil can’t do it; wishing upon a star can’t do it. But freedom, like truth, isn’t easy, and we shouldn’t expect it to be so. People who’ve been freed from horror or abuse, or who are in the continual process of freeing themselves from illness or addiction to lying liars serving themselves as their expense, know that freedom isn’t easy. They also know that it is worth it, worth whatever it takes. Nothing would be worse than to return to chains that bind or a cage that we cannot get out of, even if its bars are golden.

Ernesto Cardenal, author of our second reading this morning, knew this. He understood that all of God’s creatures, even those that most annoy and disappoint us, “are God’s love letters to us.” It can be hard to realize that, at times. It is easy to demonize opponent who themselves are in the thrall of demons. But God would have us think differently. As Br. Cardenal writes, “All of nature burns with love created through love to light love in us,” aware, as St. Paul was aware, that at the end of all things, these three remain: faith, hope, and love – and that the greatest of these is love. That’s, ultimately, what bends the arc of history to justice: not righteousness, not rage, not even truth and integrity themselves: love. The love to see all things thrive as they might. The love to see all things made new. The love that sees all things as God made them: good. Worth saving. Worth redeeming. Like the man from Capernaum with the unclean spirit: worth healing and setting free.

We don't know what happened to him, the man from Capernaum, once the unclean spirit had departed from him. Perhaps he took a job on one of the fishing boats from which Jesus had just called his "fishers for people". Perhaps he followed the man who'd set him free and spread his good news far and wide. Perhaps he saw him preach to the crowds on the mountain and on the plain, heal the sick, tend the broken-hearted, proclaim the good news to the poor. Perhaps he saw the lame walk and the blind see, and watched those who could not walk until Jesus came by, pick up their mats and walk on. Perhaps he saw the good man, the great man, ride in a people's triumph into Jerusalem. Perhaps he saw him overturn the moneychangers' tables in the temple. Perhaps he saw him crucified; perhaps he also saw him risen.

Yet perhaps, instead of all that, he simply went home and took some time to get used to being free, to being the master of his own fate and of his tongue and limbs. We don't know. But something tells me that he stayed clean, that the spirit that Jesus had driven out of him did not come back, let him alone, whether out of respect or out of the fear of the Lord that, they say, is the beginning of wisdom. All we know for sure is that the man's life became better, and his town's life became more peaceful, because Jesus chose to use his power to make it so.

May we all use such power and grace as God has given us to make people's lives better in our own day, love the sin and shame out of them, love the lies and deceitfulness out of them, love them as God loves them until the hate is gone, and bring to them that peace which passes all understanding. We need that peace – all of us need that peace. May God grant it to us, as Jesus so often did to those who met him, no matter what demons haunted them. They knew who he was, after all: the Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace, the Holy One of God. Do we? Of course we do. Of course we do. *Amen.*

