

Sermon – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1: 21-28

The story that is our gospel reading today is one of the first told of Jesus' encounter with unclean or evil spirits, Mark's gospel account being the earliest of the four synoptic gospels. The so-called unclean spirit shows itself in the man who has come into the synagogue where Jesus is teaching. This account zooms in on this very personal encounter between Jesus, the man and the spirit.

When we hear this story told almost 2,000 years later our understanding of 'unclean spirits' is probably different from those in the synagogue that day. Post enlightenment, humanity is now largely influenced by science. The irony of that statement is not lost on me! For those that do believe in science and what science tells us about the world, our experience of someone who might exhibit the effects of "unclean spirits," is probably someone who has a mental health condition, bi-polar or schizophrenia perhaps.

Spiritual matters are very different to scientific matters so if we do interpret this story in the 21st century from a scientific basis then I feel we miss it's real impact. 'Spiritual' might be defined as a dimension of our humanity that is relational – to one's environment holistically but especially to other people, and to God, who's relationship with us is the purest form of relationship, made possible by love.

Human relationships have existed since Adam and Eve and anthropology is the study of humankind. An anthropological philosopher named Rene Girard has written extensively at the intersection of anthropology, ethics and theology. I was introduced to his writings on human development that occurs through a process of observational mimicry. It is called mimetic theory, or the study of how children develop desire by copying adult behaviors, "fundamentality linking acquisition of identity, knowledge and material wealth to the development of a desire to have something others possess". Gerard believed that all human conflict, competition and rivalry emanated from this very human characteristic of mirroring of desire.

The concept of scapegoating evolves out of this understanding. When someone can't obtain what they desire they can project their anger onto another person, citing them as the reason that their desire has not been fulfilled. We all know scapegoats and how they have been unfairly ostracized from society because they have been labelled as the cause of some perceived problem.

Mimetic theory helps to explain some of the dynamics of human relationships and "how they become transcendent into social systems and cultures". We are all born into spiritual and cultural realities and nurtured in them, generally in family units. The way we are raised is fundamental to our own human development.

It has been very helpful to me to use mimetic theory when trying to understand the many ways human culture plays out in the various relationships contained in our scriptural stories. The story we heard about Jesus and the man with the unclean spirit is a story of human relationships, first the relationship between the man and Jesus, and also the relationship between the man and his religious and social communities.

The scribes mentioned in the story were the teachers in the synagogue hierarchy. They taught the Torah. They were educated men and steeped in the Law and carried with them a defined sense of authority. They were the learned men after all. Priests on the other hand had responsibility for worship and liturgy and ensuring the faithful adhered to the law, and if not, that they carried out the correct rituals to ensure they purified themselves before entering the temple once again.

So we are told, Jesus walked into the synagogue one sabbath and began to teach. Naturally his teaching was compared to the teaching of the scribes. Low and behold there was a noticeable difference. It was so different that it made a distinct impression on his newest friends but probably on the general worshippers as well.

Just as Jesus was teaching we are told that a man with an unclean spirit was in the temple and approached him. “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.”

Two things to note in this exchange. The first is that the man knew who Jesus was despite this being the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and the second was that Jesus did not immediately deny it. Rather Jesus rebuked the spirit and called it out of the man, leaving him convulsing on the floor.

When the man entered the synagogue he was ritually unclean because of the spirit that possessed him, therefore we would have been shunned by the other worshippers and barred from worshipping until he made himself pure. When Jesus healed this man he made an impact not only on the man’s life, but also on the community including Andrew, Simon Peter, James and John who were with him. They were amazed we are told.

In this story, Jesus does not represent the priest, a person who we might understand to guide people to becoming pure. Quite the opposite in fact. Jesus is expelling the collective attitude that the man is unclean, when it is the spirit of the judgmental crowd that has invaded the man and declared him “unclean.” They have made him a scapegoat. By casting out the spirit, Jesus makes the man clean so that he might re-enter the community, if the community is willing to accept Jesus’ healing of him.

Remember, we are considering relationships in this story and we can see that Jesus is giving the community an opportunity to be healed along with the man. The community would be healed if

they renounce violent rivalry that scapegoats the ‘other.’ But first as we know, healing can only begin when there is acknowledgement of the wrongs rather than exuberance and excitement of the prior action of shunning.

We can find examples of this biblical story in contemporary society if we look at relationship issues with humankind. An example of what happens in communities can be found in the actions of one man who participated in the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6.

You have probably all seen and read about the insurrection, a monumental historic moment in the republic. You would know that the day started with a rally on the Eclipse where the former President and others railed against the election result, denied they had lost and stirred up the crowd to go to the Capitol to fight for stopping the certification.

We also know only too well that the crowd took that call to heart, marched on the Capitol and broke through the flimsy police cordon and broke in. Many of them had evil intent to kidnap or kill several politicians. Others just wanted to stop the certification. And many others just got carried up in the exuberance of the crowd. One man who made it inside the Capitol was a young man named Klete Keller.

Klete Keller was a former Olympic gold medalist from the Athens and Beijing Olympics. He was easy to spot in the crowd as he was 6' 6" tall and wore his USA team jacket. It seems to me that wearing such a recognizable jacket was either foolhardy, or a sign that he wanted to be known as an Olympian, maybe revealing some fragility of character.

After the Olympics, it has been reported that Mr Keller had a lot of trouble adjusting to retirement. Many elite athletes do struggle to find themselves once they leave the heavily structured world of training and competing. His marriage broke down and he divorced, he lost his job and became homeless sleeping in his car. It has also been reported that many of his teammates and coaches knew his life was unravelling and his politics was divisive but said they were very surprised to see him in the crowd at the Capitol.

What was very telling to me about his story was his reaction the next day when he spoke by phone with his former coach Mark Schubert. Schubert is reported to have said of Keller’s call, “He apologized to me. He kept repeating ‘you’ve done so much for me and I let you down.’ He kept saying it over, and over, ‘I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.’ Keller clearly regretted his actions.

This is how mimetic desire happens. Keller was caught up in a large event and was almost powerless to stop being carried along by the crowd right up the steps and into the Rotunda. His words of regret to his former coach reveal a person swept up in the day, willingly going along with something that his gut probably told him was wrong. His shadowside, his inner dark spirit increased his desire to copy what others were doing and followed them.

Like the man in today's gospel story with the unclean spirit, Klete Keller has been disowned by his community, his former teammates, the US Olympic Committee, his employer and no doubt some of his family and friends. The unclean spirits separated him from his community.

Keller's response was clear contrition and regret. His sober assessment of his actions might be the catalyst for change in his life, to find new purpose away from the cult-like following of the former president. He might find renewed purpose in relationships with his family, his former teammates and others. If he does, and if the community accepts his sentiments of contrition, he would have overcome the evil force that drove him from those he loves in the first place. He would have a compelling story to tell.

If his community does not accept him then they are acting with the same unclean spirits, making him a scapegoat for the actions that day and for the divisive nature of political life. But this would not be representative of what Jesus is teaching us in this story today.

Jesus' healing of the man with the unclean spirit helped turn the man from a life shunned by his community, to one where he would be embraced once again. Because the synagogue community was witness to the healing power of Jesus' words, it too took a step toward becoming a more compassionate and loving community, recognizing that healing from past behavior, healing from our unclean spirits, is a way of building community, not breaking community down.

'Have you come to destroy us,' the unclean spirit asked Jesus. No, Jesus did not come to destroy anything, except maybe the culture of the community that was already destroying him. The culture of the former president is cult-like and he drew enormous power and satisfaction by pulling in vulnerable people like Klete Keller, with his divisive rhetoric. He revealed to us all the danger of mimetic desire, group think and the power of wanting to belong.

Jesus came not just to heal individuals but to heal all of us, who reside in communities of people. He came to save us from perpetuating violence against others, such as the lost and marginalized, and those that suffer with often untreated mental health illnesses.

Jesus came to save us from being people that prosper by destroying and shunning others. If Jesus can heal us, we as his body on earth can help to heal others. However, we must always be aware of and own our own unclean spirits. When we acknowledge our own unclean spirits we can begin the process of healing.

Jesus stands always ready to call out our unclean spirits, if only we ask him.

Amen