



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

FEBRUARY 1, 2015
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Are Your Spirits Clean? Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28

I have to admit that when I read a passage like this one, I usually smile to myself. It is not because I think the story is humorous. Instead, I chuckle to think how quaint those first century believers were. Not understanding the complex workings of the mind and body, they attributed most of what they did not understand to the realm of the spiritual world and all the bad things to demons.

It appears as if there is not much going on in this story other than a demon calling out Jesus, threatening to expose him for the Son of God that he is. Yet, it is far more a story of Jesus' authority than it is a tale about the dark side of the spirit world.¹ Other stories, like the one Mark tells later about the boy who goes into fits and endangers himself (Mark 9:14-29) remind us that many illnesses such as epilepsy were misunderstood in those days and attributed to possession by evil spirits. Today we know that numerous maladies considered in scripture to be demonic are actually physical or mental illnesses which can be treated successfully. While no illness—physical, mental, or emotional—is considered “good,” there should be no stigma attached to the difficulties with which any one of us might struggle. While we all have spiritual struggles of one kind or another, wrestling with a particular illness should not suggest that we are at odds with God. It is good that most of us no longer consider someone to be “possessed” when they deal with complex illnesses.

Yet, we cannot dismiss these stories from scripture or overlook their significance for our faith. As I mentioned earlier, many of the stories that speak of individuals having unclean spirits are told to emphasize the authority Jesus has over all creation. Fortune tellers and faith healers purported to have special powers that enabled them to see into the future or heal maladies that afflicted people. Some scribes and Pharisees claimed power which they used to intimidate and control the Jewish people. Jesus, however, arrived on the scene with full authority from God, authority which even the darker powers

¹Matt Skinner, “Commentary on Mark 1:21-28,” *Working Preacher*, available online at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2343.

of life recognized. Thus the story of the man with the unclean spirit reminds us above all that God in Christ is Lord of all life.

It strikes me as odd that Jesus would demand this particular “demon” to leave since it spoke nothing but the truth. After all, Jesus *is* “the Holy One of God.” So I wonder, what about this particular spirit made it *unclean*? In an insightful chapter of a book which examines our attitudes about the various worship styles of the church today, the authors reflect on an observation by Robert C. Roberts which states that “the Holy Spirit isn’t the only spirit around.”² Cornelius Plantinga and Sue Rozeboom go on to explain,

The Holy Spirit is in competition with a lot of other spirits, and some of them look as if *they* come from God too. They look as if they might be life-giving spirits. They feel as if they might be comforting spirits. The spirit of personal ambition, for example, can look like holy zeal. The spirit of aesthetic pleasure can feel like adoration of God. The spirit of envy can sound like the hunger for social justice. What’s more, these spirits show up not only on TV but also in church, where they compete with God for our loyalty.³

The point is that some of these unclean spirits do not come from outside of us; they are within us. These unclean spirits do not necessarily cause us to speak in deep, ethereal voices or spin our heads around. Nevertheless, sometimes our thoughts and attitudes become disruptive spirits which we might rightly consider to be “unclean.”

Today I want to mention a handful of these spirits which I recognize within myself and within the larger world. They are often subtle voices that speak in sweet or practical-sounding tones but carry the potential for harm.

One of the most subtle of the unclean spirits I have discovered is that of tolerance. You heard me correctly: tolerance. We are all familiar with the “my way or the highway” type of intolerance, but I am as much concerned with the type of intolerance that emerges from people who strive to be tolerant. Sometimes, in our zeal to be tolerant in all things, we fail to offer that same gift to the people who are intolerant toward us. For instance, the theological

²Robert C. Roberts, *The Strengths of a Christian* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 19; as quoted in Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. and Sue A. Rozeboom, *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking about Christian Worship Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

³Plantinga and Rozeboom, 1.

struggle that has strangled the witness of the American Protestant church for the past four decades has been, to a great degree, over tolerance. Those of us who claimed a “moderate” perspective about faith begged our more conservative brothers and sisters to be tolerant toward our beliefs. Although such tolerance was not offered, we found our way to a place where we are able to worship and serve God as guided by our faith. If we are honest, however, we will admit that the experience of hurt and distress resulted in our own intolerance of the beliefs and practices of our more conservative brothers and sisters. Our quest for tolerance led us to a place of intolerance. In the political world, we see opposing camps working hard on one hand to get the other side to acknowledge their viewpoints and then, on the other hand, mocking the opinions of their opponents.

A few weeks ago the world was shocked by the murderous attack on the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Claiming the right of free speech to employ satire to point out the frailties and foibles of individuals, organizations, and belief systems, the publication gave equal attention to all people. There is no justification for the bloodshed which sought to punish the magazine for its cartoonish images of the Prophet Mohammed. But we have to ask ourselves what responsibilities go along with the right of free speech. Is there some point at which we must offer respect and tolerance to the very people from whom we demand tolerance? I think there is a lesson to be learned that while free speech must be protected, not all forms of free speech are suitable for particular contexts. Let us avoid the unclean spirit of intolerance that emerges from our own call for tolerance.

Another unclean spirit that sometimes creeps in upon us is what I would call dissociated sympathy. When tragedy occurs somewhere in the world or even in our community, often our immediate reaction is sorrow that such horrible things happen. At the same time, however, we frequently feel gratitude that such an event has not happened in our country or in our neighborhood. I sometimes find myself reading the police report in the paper, not to discover whose property was stolen or who was assaulted; instead, I am looking to see if any crimes are taking place in my neighborhood. And I am happy when they are not!

But I know better. I should feel sympathy for every victim listed in a police report. As a congregation, we know what it is like to have property stolen and we know what it is like to have someone we love attacked and murdered. There should never be a loss of life in this community that we do not feel as if it is one of our own . . . because it always is! We must keep the

relief we feel in perspective when we escape loss or harm while someone else is brokenhearted or wounded. As a community—whether it be Rocky Mount or the world—we grieve because someone, anyone, suffers. Not until we ourselves feel the sting when another young Black man is killed or another Afghan village is blasted away or more young girls are kidnapped in Nigeria or someone in authority misuses their power to intimidate someone else will we effect the change we need in the world. There is no one anywhere who has not experienced fear and loss and grief. We can find ways to empathize with others that will lead us to a better sense of what it means to be brothers and sisters.

I am grateful that scripture reveals that God has just as many emotional reactions as we do. Perhaps to our dismay, we discover that God is also capable of righteous indignation or anger over injustice. It is certainly appropriate—and perhaps expected—for us to get angry over wrongs that are committed by one person or group over another person or group. Yet, such outrage is appropriate and effective only when it is claimed by someone. I have noticed, however, that media outlets provide numerous means by which anyone can express anonymous indignation, making observations and accusations that may not be accurate or fair, without taking responsibility for them. Anonymous calls to the newspaper’s “Speak Up” hotline purport to care about issues in the community but frequently misstate facts or make allegations that serve only to complicate the issues that are before us. I do not even read the comments made online about news articles because they are often mean spirited, bigoted, and anonymous. When injustice occurs, we ought to speak out, but we also ought to claim our words. Spitting our venom into the community while hiding behind a veil of anonymity only creates bigger problems and deeper pain. We must all avoid the unclean spirit of anonymous indignation.

Finally, one of the most insidious unclean spirits that flits about us is public religion. You may remember that Constantine was the Roman Emperor whose mother was Christian. Recognizing that it would be both expedient and profitable, he “Christianized” the empire by decree. Religion spread, but so did horrendous abuses in the name of Christ. The lesson learned is that no government action can change the hearts of people. Attempts to impose religion on people by posting the Ten Commandments in public buildings or demanding that Sharia law become the law of the land do very little to engender faith but do a lot to evoke anger. Furthermore, as Christians, we neglect our responsibility to share the Gospel when we relegate that role to our government or anyone else.

Jesus shared the Gospel person by person. He taught his disciples firsthand. He witnessed the Gospel by his manner of life. And in order to provide the ultimate illustration of his love, Jesus willingly died and rose again. Jesus never forced faith on other people. He claimed it was far too precious a gift to handle in that manner. Besides, the Pharisees had proved that method did not work. Jesus never assumed that mere exposure to his teachings would change the world. He decreed that his living, breathing movement must be embodied in the lives of his people who follow him. A spirit of forcing faith on people is unclean and should be cast out.

In his letters to the Christians in Ephesus and Colossae, The Apostle Paul begs them to rid themselves of negative attitudes like anger, wrath, malice, slander, foul talk, and lying. These kinds of actions are unclean spirits. Instead, he urges believers to live with the Spirit of God. He writes,

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:12-17

When we rid ourselves of unclean spirits, we open ourselves to the Spirit of God which fills us with love and life. May it be so with us all. Amen.

February 1, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We want to thank you with our whole selves, O God, and to offer ourselves fully in praise. We witness signs of your great works all around us and delight in your faithfulness to us, and we desire to love you with all that is within us. We see evidence that your Spirit is at work in our world, and we long for a time when the promise of our lives would no longer be hindered by unyielding fetters which bind us.

But too often we miss the riches of the abundant life you intend for us because we are weighed down by struggles and failures from the past, anxiety in the present moment, or fear of what waits around the next corner. Our spirits are soiled by worry and self-doubt, by guilt and grief, and the possibility of each day is eclipsed by the darkness and fear which surround us.

Turn us loose, O God. Liberate us to claim and to live the full and joyful lives you offer to your children. Cleanse and renew our spirits, we pray, so that we are able to recognize your extraordinary grace in our ordinary circumstances and to find the courage to answer your call. Loose the chains which have too long held us back from knowing the full measure of blessing from community with one another and communion with you. Loose the shackles of sin and guilt, of injustice and suspicion, of short-sightedness and self-interest, of violence and vengeance which have imprisoned us so that we might experience the freedom of trust and compassion and peace bestowed through your life-changing Spirit, and that we might work for the realization of these gifts for the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters.

Turn us loose, O God. Cleanse and renew our spirits so that we will be free and ready for life in your gracious kingdom and our hearts will indeed be filled with your praise. In the name of our Teacher and Healer, the Holy One of God, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
Associate Minister