

On Good Authority

January 28, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Mark 1: 21-28

After church Last Sunday I had the chance to drop-in on a lovely conversation that Carla was leading with our newcomers, including all three who joined today. They were getting to know each other, asking questions about the church. When Carla shared our liturgy for a joining Sunday I sensed some hesitation about the formality of the language, especially of the questions, so I chimed in. Take the second one we asked, for example: “Do you renounce the power of evil and accept the freedom of new life in Christ?” Let’s be real. This isn’t an everyday, throw-away question. It merits unpacking, and frankly leads to more questions. So, we opened it up. I shared that a form of those exact questions have been used at baptisms and church membership rituals for hundreds of years! It’s traditional language, ritual language, intentionally set apart from how we’d usually speak to each other. It ties us to the wider church in all times and places. Still, the idea of the “renunciation of evil” feels so heavy, if not scary. It conjures all kinds of creepy Hollywood horror movies and a strange voice that says the word like this: “Eeeevil”! Seriously though, to renounce the power of evil means we first have to admit, confess even, that evil has power in the first place, within us and around us! And doesn’t that very premise give evil too much power?

This isn’t the time for a philosophical treatise on the matter - sorry to disappoint the three or so of you who might have liked that! (You know who you are.) But I’ll say what I said off the cuff last week. We’re not talking here about Satan or any mythological beings or personifications of evil. We are talking about what runs counter to God’s love, within and around us. And we’re talking about the very real, often costly, if not deadly, systemic forces that manifest in our racism, misogyny, materialism and other isms, homophobia, transphobia and other deep-seated fear and hatred that lead us to think we are better or worse than others. Meanwhile, accepting the freedom of new life in Christ means accepting that despite the worst thing we have ever thought, said or done, God’s love and forgiveness are always available. With that knowledge we can be free to make better choices that stem from God’s love for all humanity and all of creation.

Back to that renunciation of evil though, you might see why I started there given our scripture for today. Jesus, still in that lakeside village of Capernaum I preached about last week, with a grand total of 4 followers so far, steps into the local synagogue and steps out to begin his public ministry of teaching and healing. At one level, this is a prime example of Jesus himself renouncing evil. At least he rebukes the unclean spirits occupying this poor man’s soul. In the first century, to be unclean was to be unholy. And the way he calls out the spirits here—silencing them and casting them out—is remarkably similar to later instances in the gospel when Jesus calls out demons! Yet the passage is more than a miracle of healing. It starts with his teaching. The crowd is astounded by Jesus “for he taught them as one having *authority*.” And later, after the healing, the text says, “they were all amazed” and they kept on asking one another “What is this? A new teaching—with *authority*.”

Retired Methodist Pastor Steve Garnass Holmes muses poetically and personally about just this passage:

Well, yes, Jesus has come not just to heal one man,

but to sabotage the very structure of evil.
And in particular to do away with the lie
of uncleanness....

Some things I've done, some things others have done to me,
make me feel dirty. Somehow unpresentable to God.
Jesus will have none of it.
It's something about my past, not who I am.

I want to think of myself
on some scale of acceptability to God,
a little unclean, part of me troublingly unpresentable,
but cleaner than many.

Jesus will have none of it.
God welcomes all of us, dirt and all.
The crud on us, that both we and others have put there,
is not who we are. It's just mud on the jewel.

*Jesus, I know who you are, the holy one of God.
Cast out the spirit of uncleanness.
Help me see the shining gem in me and everyone:
beneath the shame, the wonder.*

Can anyone relate? Maybe to the shame parts most of all, if not to those scales of acceptability. If we're being honest, I'm guessing we all have them. I also like how this poem widens the lens of the healing and sets Jesus' rebuke of the unclean spirits in context. Jesus isn't just casting out those particular demons. In doing so, he's tearing down the very structure of evil itself!

Martin Smith, Episcopal Priest and former Superior at St John's Monastery right here on Memorial Drive, has written: "The difficulty is that the most profoundly diseased and demonic notions and attitudes that pervade the world and infest our hearts are so common and deep-seated that they appear normal. They seem natural, though they are in violent contradiction with the created nature God endowed us with; ...not raving lunatics, but those persons in our inner community who are racist, who behind a polite mask nurse condescension and contempt towards those of other cultures, races, and color. They are the selves [of our self] who maintain in the heart hostile stereotypes [of Jews, or immigrants, or gays] for example, ...who cling to the ancient glamorization of war, and accept without a murmur the preparations for nuclear warfare that can destroy the earth. They are the inner people who are the collaborators with the forces of consumerism and waste. The demoniacs within may be the most conservative parts of ourselves that are scared of any change in the balance of power, that flare up, sickened and panicky..."

Smith puts it even more bluntly when he writes this bracing statement: "Face Christ in your own heart and consent to his ministry of exorcism now. There are in you pockets of resistance to the kingdom and

the Spirit, places where falsehood has dug in. Warped convictions and diseased attitudes are very tenacious. They will not surrender easily.”¹

Powerful words. And here we may begin to see why Mark seems to insist we consider Jesus’ authority! It’s the profound nature of authority that is required to heal and so “renounce the power of evil” in our inner lives and world!

I wonder how often we stop to think about authority. To be clear, I’m not asking how often we question authority. We do that all the time, especially here. Have we ever thought about surrendering ourselves, or giving consent to, or acting on and *under* an authority that is above our own reason, feelings or instincts? And by that, I mean acting on *good* authority. And what better authority - at least on how to live a meaningful and moral life - than Jesus!

We are all too aware that there is a version of toxic authority and authoritarianism that is seemingly possessing far too many in our country, and on our national and global political scenes. These days, simply questioning it is not enough! Whether we call these forces - *not* the people themselves mind you – unclean, unholy or downright evil, we need to acknowledge the reality of their power, and start renouncing it based on a higher power! Are we afraid that naming these forces as rooted in evil will give them too much power! Do we really want to believe that it’s that bad, or that clear what's at stake? After all, not going there leaves us off the hook from doing anything about it. More deeply, I wonder if it’s because we aren’t sure anymore what good authority is! Perhaps we’ve lost trust that there even is such a thing as good authority! Ultimately, I wonder, are we afraid that Jesus, and more to the point, God’s love doesn’t have the power to conquer evil? These are legit and very hard questions! But, what if? What if we doubled down on our moral clarity, let ourselves be amazed and astonished by the teachings and healing power of God’s love, and started a ministry of calling out demons everywhere, including those nasty and tenacious ones within us, yet always, always doing so in love, which Jesus, in all the gospels, demonstrates is so much more effective? After all, that’s what makes the authority we encounter today so toxic, so evil seeming! It lacks love. It lacks kindness. It is brutal, domineering and unforgiving! And the unclean, unholy spirits that are driving it to inhabit people in increasing ranks of power need to be called out? By what authority are we called and empowered to do just this? By the authority of love! By the authority of what Jesus taught and modeled for us in stories like this one.

You may not have realized it, but you said it yourselves just a bit ago! Every time we share our ancient covenant we read the language “We who are now brought together and united into one Church under Jesus Christ our Head!” The Puritans blew it on plenty of counts - no doubt because they were carrying their own demons of having been persecuted and traumatized before they came to these shores. But still somehow, 388 years later, we inherit the language of our covenant from them. And it’s clear they thought a lot about authority! For them, it wasn’t the Pope or the King who had authority to tell them what to do or believe! It was Jesus, their Head! When they joined a church, they were joining in covenant, a voluntary, mutual agreement to live in community according to what he said and how the Spirit of his love and God’s led! When there was a question about how what he did or said related to their actions, they would gather in congregational meetings, like the one we are about to have, and discern together where the Spirit was leading them, the same Spirit that was in Jesus. In this way, each person brought their freedom of conscience into a covenantal connection. Ideally, no one, not even the clergy, had more authority, one over the another, for they were held equally under Jesus, their humble

¹ Smith, Martin L. A Season for the Spirit (p. 128). Church Publishing Incorporated.

head! Together, they would earnestly listen to scripture, listen to and discern the voice of God's Spirit above all lesser and evil spirits! Did they always get it right? Not by a long shot, *just like us!* Did they often they think they were cleaner or more pure than many! Yup, *just like us!* But they gave us a beautiful way – the congregational way – to work it out and pray it out and confess it out together, in mutual love, mutual respect, mutual accountability, so near as God would give them grace! I love that last part.

May we do now what they did then, about matters great and small. And may we also consent to a ministry of exorcism now, for the sake of our healing and the healing of our world. May we bend our knees, hearts and ears to hear the Spirit of God's mercy and Christ's healing ever rebuking, renouncing, silencing, and calling out in love all that is unclean, unholy and evil. And may we too be astonished by those jewels under the mud, those shining gems all round us. Under the shame, the wonder! And under the wonder, the beauty! And under the beauty, the belovedness of every human and creature. Wouldn't that be a freedom and new life we all yearn to accept? Amen!

