

Cleaning House

Jan. 29, 2012

Mark 1:21-28

The Screwtape Letters is my favorite C. S. Lewis book. Screwtape is an older, experienced devil who has written a series of instructional letters to his nephew and demon apprentice, Wormwood. Setting the stage for this demonic correspondence, Lewis explains in the preface: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. [The devils] themselves are equally pleased by both errors...” Screwtape refers to Satan as “Our Father Below.” Devils in training learn to tempt humans, and to keep them from a healthy awareness of the presence of evil—an awareness that is tempered by confidence that the final victory over evil, as for death and sin, has been won already in Jesus Christ.

Our gospel lesson this morning confronts our own attitudes toward evil and its representatives in this life. The very first miracle Jesus performs in Mark is an exorcism. Jesus casts out an unclean spirit while he is teaching in the synagogue. This seems a primitive business to us in our modern sophistication. We imagine that the poor man in our text was possessed by epilepsy rather than demons. Other instances of possession in the Bible might be explained today in terms of some form of mental illness. Rather than exorcism, we might treat the biblically possessed with drugs or talk therapy.

Jesus says simply, “Be silent, and come out of him!” The demon then convulses the man and cries out with a loud voice, obeying Jesus and leaving the poor man. This is pretty effective and efficient talk therapy! But let’s not get hung up on either of C. S. Lewis’ extremes this morning. We should neither dismiss the whole idea of devils nor be too interested in them. Mark’s gospel is neither obsessed nor dismissive about the presence and power of the demonic in this life. Mark takes for granted that evil can be personified, and that exorcists can cast out demons.

The point is that there are forces at work in the world that try to keep us from God. That’s really what an unclean spirit is all about. Sin and evil have the same objective in this regard: they separate us from God. Sin is an undeniable part of the human condition. Reinhold Niebuhr called it the one empirically verifiable doctrine of our faith. Sin’s evil twin is a force that seems to come from beyond us,

and yet can possess us and thoroughly take us over. The Old Testament view was that the unclean could not approach God. The unclean spirit was an unseen, mysterious dynamic that would exploit every opportunity to prevent or disrupt a person's relationship with God. There is a craftiness to this evil force that suggests something quite personal and capable of getting inside our heads, possessing mind, body, heart and soul.

The first thing Jesus did when he had his first four disciples following him was to teach in the synagogue and to cast out this unclean spirit. Mark is telling us that these two things, teaching and exorcism, are two sides of the same coin. Both replace garbage with goodness, deleting and SPAMMING trash and downloading good stuff. Jesus healed many people of all manner of illness, but to dwell too much on "what exactly was wrong" or "how did he do it" misses the point. Mark does not dwell on Jesus' power over demons. He matter of factly tells these stories with characteristic Markan brevity. The audiences of these mighty deeds of healing power were impressed and Jesus' fame spread throughout the region, but neither the crowds nor his closest disciples caught on to what Jesus was about until the very end. It took the cross to bring the Roman Centurion to the conclusion, "This man was the Son of God." Throughout Mark, even the disciples remain thick headed and hard hearted. What matters to Mark is that Jesus has the authority to usher in the kingdom of God. Healing and teaching are methods and means to assist that ushering.

The author of *Zorba the Greek*, Kazantzakis, also wrote *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a provocative novel that became the controversial Martin Scorsese film of the same name. Kazantzakis portrays Jesus as a victim of wildly opposing spiritual forces. Jesus is thrown to the ground with raging fits and convulsions when gripped by God or Satan. The spirit of God is represented by the sharp, piercing force of eagle's talons on Jesus' head, a precursor of the crown of thorns. There is a fine line between these fitful experiences of the presence of God and what we would understand as madness. When the Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness after his baptism, Jesus draws a circle around himself in the sand and sits down within it, as all the evil forces threaten to draw him outside the circle to devour him. The novelist makes it clear that the battles between God and Satan are not just something going on inside Jesus' head. There are lines outside of us that must not be crossed.

The people of Jesus' day had no doubt about the presence and power of evil in their world. Satan, the prince of darkness and Lord of the flies, Lucifer, by

whatever name, personified evil as an ever present force to be reckoned with. Consider the twentieth century. About the time the Western mind had dismissed demons from the pantheon of real forces in this life, along came Franco, Mussolini and Hitler. Then Stalin and the Great Satan of Soviet power, China's Mao, Korea's Kim, Iran's Ayatollahs, Iraq's Saddam and Al Qaeda's bin Laden. When the second president Bush talked of an Axis of Evil in the early twenty-first century, many otherwise rational Americans accepted this as nothing more than a way of speaking about the way things really are in the world. We were reminded that one nation must demonize another in order to justify going to war.

The gospel of Mark tells us that the reign of God is the greatest force for good that the world will ever know. The gospel that Jesus proclaims and represents is a tale that begins with casting out a demon and ends with the cross and resurrection. Instead of demonization, hatred and violence, the gospel uses love and forgiveness as its chief weapons. Instead of righteous indignation in the pursuit of vengeance as justice, troops for the reign of God fight the enemy with compassion. Instead of the power of might to conquer and destroy from the top down, the kingdom of God relies on the power of right to build up from the bottom. Instead of trickle down power, the gospel represents the power from below that bubbles up. The reign of God on earth turns upside down all relationships of power: the servant is Lord, the last is first, the least is greatest, the lamb replaces the lion as the king of the forest, the little child leads the army that has beaten its swords into plowshares and has planted daisies in the barrels of the guns.

Imagine your life as a chair to be occupied. In the academic world, chairs may be endowed by donors to the school, and in these chairs are scholars who teach and research. Their positions are secured by funds that support the endowed chair in which they are honored to sit. Imagine your heart as a chair to be occupied. This chair is the throne of the human heart. There can be many different occupants for this chair, gods seated on this throne, powers or funds that keep your life going. What or whom occupies your chair? Work? Money? Leisure? Drugs? Video games? Sports? When Jesus confronts the demon in the man in the synagogue that day, he delivers an eviction notice. Get out, he orders. The demon likes it where he is and does not want to leave. The evil is comfortably seated in the chair. "I know who you are," the demon says to Jesus. But Jesus rebukes the demon and commands him to leave, and the demon makes his violent exit.

Evil can get a toehold in our lives and in the vast universe by setting aside the first commandment: don't worry about it; any god will do; any port in a storm; just keep the seat warm. But Jesus says we cannot serve more than one master at a time. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Where our treasures are, there will our heart be also. There is room for one and only one occupant on the seat of the throne of our lives.

We have a nasty hymn in our hymnal that is based on this gospel text:

The music is so troubling, I won't even ask Kay to play it. But I do want you to turn with me to the Thomas Troeger text, number 176:

"Silence! Frenzied, unclean spirit," cried God's healing, Holy One.

"Cease your ranting! Flesh can't bear it. Flee as night before the sun."

At Christ's voice the demon trembled, from its victim madly rushed,

While the crowd that was assembled stood in wonder, stunned and hushed.

Christ, the demons still are thriving in the grey cells of the mind:

Tyrant voices, shrill and driving, twisted thoughts that grip and bind,

Doubts that stir the heart to panic, fears distorting reason's sight,

*Guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with
fright.*

Silence, Christ, the unclean spirit, in our mind and in our heart.

Speak your word that when we hear it all our demons shall depart.

Clear our thought and calm our feeling, still the fractured, warring soul.

By the power of your healing make us faithful, true and whole. Amen.