

## **JESUS AND THE SPIRIT OF THIS AGE**

(Mark 1:21-28; 1 Cor. 8:1-13)

Dr. J. Daniel Day

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Some persons today are certain you'll not find Jesus in church; they are convinced he's given up on the church. But it heartens me to note that in the very first chapter of the New Testament's first-written Gospel, Mark, we read that the first place Jesus shows up is in a meeting like this, in a Jewish "church" service, a synagogue. For me, that's basis enough to trust our Lord just might be here in this moment, still wanting to get something across to us, in us.

But in that service on that long ago day, just when everyone was being amazed by what Jesus had to say—for his teaching is not like anyone else's on earth, once you really hear it, his stuff is different!—just when folks are realizing just how different and powerful his message is, the service is interrupted by a man with "an unclean spirit."

Ponder that term: an unclean spirit. I've always understood that to be another way to say the man was 'demon possessed'—a Bible-times diagnosis that's always been problematic for me. But regardless of my questions about demon possession, when I consider this expression, an unclean spirit, I become uneasy. For I must admit I've often been the carrier of an unclean spirit. I now realize with embarrassment that there were Sundays when I stood before you in this pulpit with an unclean spirit—a spirit that was ruled by anger or fear or

impatience or arrogance. And truth be told, unclean spirits walk into every church every Sunday in laymen's clothes. We all bring our garbage with us; we tote it inside us.

Oh, to be sure, we also bring our good stuff. Gentleness, joy, thoughtfulness, warmth, love—all these also are within us and thank God, these better spirits often show up in the loveliest of ways. But always there's also the shadow side, the unclean spirit. I find it interesting that the Bible's word for demon likely finds its etymological root in the word that means "two" or "dual." That suggests that we aren't just one, we are complex and many-sided, just as the man in our story uses both singular and plural to speak of himself. And frankly, I don't believe anyone moves too far toward maturity until and unless you are keenly aware that unclean spirits often move into your living space and set up shop.

So notice that in this story the outburst of the man's unclean spirit stops everything. Nothing more can be heard or done in the synagogue that day until this spirit is dealt with. Oh, Jesus could have raised his voice and tried like some preachers to shout the crying child on the third pew, but nobody profits from a shouting match.

Yet, that's what life sometimes becomes, even what church sometimes tragically becomes--a shouting match. That's what marriages and families

sometimes become. And it's what our society, our nation has become. Talking heads interrupting one another, trying to out-scream, out-tweet, out Facebook one another. Or, just as destructively, we just quit talking to one another at all, and retreat to our separate channels and watch and listen only to what we agree with. Siloed, isolated, stymied. The spirit of this age, is an "unclean" spirit, a spirit that shuts down not just the government but even ourselves and so much else beside.

See this at work in the ancient church of Corinth. Our reading reveals such a spirit at work in a conflict about eating food previously offered to idols. At its base this was a case of some liberated Christians who believed they were free to eat or drink anything they chose so long as they did so with thanksgiving to God—a position Paul himself seems to have shared. But in fact the conflict was caused by these persons' uppity spirit that didn't care how offensive, how destructive their eating and drinking was to the scruples of others. A spirit of self-assertion was at work in Corinth. There was too much concern about me and mine and my opinions, and too little concern for others, for how my words or actions or attitudes might affect others. And that spirit brought this church to a sad stand still.

How often we've seen this insidious evil work its way into us and then into our families and churches and society. We get so caught up in what we are sure is

right, whether it be our personal beliefs about the first chapter of Genesis or about the Bible itself, or our preferred style of worship or music, or our political opinions—and we become so ardent about the rightness of our opinions that we forget that for us being right isn't the only thing that matters. Relationships and responsibility for one another also matter.

I've recently been reading much concerning Abraham Lincoln and realizing afresh that though he was not a professing Christian he behaved more in a more Christian manner than many who claimed to be. Even as he prosecuted a war that spilled a river of bitter blood in a divided America Lincoln never spoke meanly or derogatorily of the leaders or people of the South, as so many of his time did. He did not use malicious, accusatory words of others. He didn't even blame the war upon Johnny Reb, he simply said this war "came." Always he seems to have been concerned to maintain the bridges that would once again be needed once the better angels of our nature again surfaced. The man had the maturity to rise above the spirit of the age. Partisan he was, most surely, but not in a contemptuous way.

And with that I return to that synagogue service where I began and to that man with an unclean spirit. And by now I am sure you realize that this man actually represents us, represents all of us and our troubled, divided nation and world. I hear him cry aloud, I see him disrupt the decorum of that service and I

wince. But then, on second thought, I nod my head in profound appreciation. For where better for a man with an unclean spirit to be than in God's house? Is that not why this place is here, for us to bring all our uncleanness of spirit and life here and dump it all out before God in hopes that something new and fine and happy might find birth here? The soured-up, the fed-up, the bored, the belligerent, the spineless, the suspicious, the critical, the perennially negative. Indeed, what better place for these spirits to be than right here in the presence of the Savior?

But if something good is to happen, honesty and openness must be present, too. We must be honest, we must be open to the voice of the Spirit saying, "Thou art the man." None of this sitting here, looking around at the others who really need to listen to the preacher and shape up today. No, if anything notable is to transpire today it will be because someone laid down her or his defenses and opinions and listened, really listened to what the Spirit may be saying to your spirit. Conservatives, Liberals, left-leaning, right-leaning, or just bent over people, sincerely whispering: "Lord, is it I?"

Something's got to give in America today. Something's got to break loose in our churches today. The unclean spirit of the age must be cast out by the HOLY Spirit of God. And the bearer of the Holy Spirit, even Jesus the Christ, is in the house this morning! So do notice that as Jesus deals with this man he makes a

grand distinction between the man and the unclean spirit that has him bound. Jesus knows the man is more and grander than the spirit that has overtaken him. Jesus speaks roughly to the spirit, but respectfully to the man. Just as he speaks respectfully to you, but with sacred ferocity he will banish the unclean spirit that holds us.

In those years after my retirement when I taught preaching I occasionally made fun of the practice of always ending a sermon with a poem. I said it was a tactic that maybe had some power at some point in the past but that it was Dead on Arrival in today's pulpit. Well, I probably was right, but even so I conclude with a poem that I understand was found pinned to a crucifix in Normandy four hundred years ago.

I am the great sun, but you do not see me  
I am your husband, but you turn away  
I am the captive, but you do not free me  
I am the captain you will not obey

I am the truth, but you will not believe me  
I am the city, where you will not stay  
I am your wife, your child, but you will leave me  
I am the God to whom you will not pray

I am your counsel, but you do not hear me  
I am the lover whom you will betray  
I am the victor, but you do not cheer me  
I am the holy dove whom you will slay

I am your life, but if you will not name me  
Seal up your soul with tears and never blame me.

-'From a Norman Crucifix of 1632' by Charles Causley

Jesus is in the house! Is there anything you need him to help you with?