

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching — with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Pastors are often looked to as people who have the answers to spiritual questions. I must admit that, like most pastors, I kind of enjoy this role. I seldom hesitate in offering my profound, wise insight to anyone who asks — and sometimes even to those who don't ask.

Today, however, I am hesitating a bit. Our gospel reading confronts us with a topic with which I'm more than a little uncomfortable — the topic of unclean spirits, demons, possession, and exorcism.

For 1700 years in the Christian church, people had no trouble accepting at face value the Biblical accounts of demon possession and Jesus' authority to expel these unclean spirits. Then came the age known as the Enlightenment, and people began to assert that scientific inquiry and rational thought are the only basis for truth. Demon possession in the Bible was recognized to be nothing more than mental illness, and Jesus' exorcisms were explained as being the equivalent of psychotherapy. Many people today take an account like today's gospel reading and lump it together with the idea that the earth is flat and that the sun and stars revolve around the earth. That is to say, talk of demons and possession is simply the attempt of ancient people to explain the world around them as best they could given their understanding of science.

I'm not sure we should be so quick to dismiss the existence of the demonic. I don't mean to suggest that we should ignore the great advances that have been made in psychology and be quick to label anyone who acts abnormally as demon possessed. And I don't mean to suggest that little red demons with horns and pointed tails actually exist. But I do suggest that while there may not be personified demons, there is indeed an aspect of our existence that can be termed the demonic and that it is possible for the demonic to possess us to varying degrees.

There is no denying that the New Testament is a 1st century book and we are 21st century people. We don't understand the world around us in the same way Jesus and his contemporaries did. But I think we can make some observations about Jesus' confrontation with the unclean spirit in our gospel reading and relate them to our current situation.

First, notice that the man who is possessed is anonymous and mute. The man is not identified and he never speaks. Only the unclean spirit speaks with Jesus. A consequence of possession is the loss of both personality and the ability to speak for oneself. Possession renders one powerless.

Secondly, exorcising the demon is a difficult, unpleasant experience. The exit of the demon throws the man into convulsions. We might picture the scene as being similar to witnessing the painful withdrawal symptoms of a heroin addict. Once someone is possessed by a demon, getting rid of it is neither easy nor pleasant.

Thirdly, the man is freed from his possession not by his will power or by participating in a therapy group, but only by the authoritative word of Jesus. The people are amazed by Jesus' new teaching, and what is new about Jesus' teaching is not the content. Mark doesn't tell us anything about the words or ideas that comprised Jesus' teaching. The newness of the teaching is the authority with which Jesus presents it. We might say that Jesus' teaching is Jesus himself.

This is what I hear the gospel reading telling us about demon possession — possession is the loss of ability to speak for oneself, it is difficult (even painful) to be freed from it, and being freed from the demon is accomplished by the authoritative word of Christ.

Having shared that, I'd like to also share some observations from the writings of two contemporary authors, both of whom believe in the existence of the demonic and make solid arguments to support their belief.

First is a book some of you may have read when it was published 35 years ago, *People of the Lie* by Scott Peck. It was on the New York Times bestseller list for many weeks when it came out. Peck, himself a psychiatrist,

writes in an easy-to-read style that makes frequent use of case studies. He speaks of the demonic on an individual level and recounts two cases of what he identifies as possession and the ensuing exorcisms in which he took part.

Peck makes the observation that one cannot convince others of the existence of the demonic anymore than one can convince others of the existence of God. Belief in God requires a personal experience. He feels that belief in the reality of the demonic is similar – it requires a personal encounter.

Peck calls Satan the “Father of lies” and says that perhaps Satan’s best deception is its general success in concealing its own reality from the human mind – an idea not unlike that put forth by C.S. Lewis in his famous book, *The Screwtape Letters*.

The second book is one I was introduced to in a seminary class. It was written by William Stringfellow, an Episcopalian lay theologian. The title of this 1974 book is a little ponderous: *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. This book is more difficult to read than Peck’s *People of the Lie*, but if you’re willing to do some serious reading, I highly recommend it.

Stringfellow, writing in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal and the My Lai massacre in Viet Nam, sees the demonic not on the individual level, but on the corporate level, taking root in our institutions: government, military, corporations, seminaries, and institutional church bodies. He believes these institutions can easily become the principalities and powers that possess us and render us powerless, stifling our ability to speak.

I want to be clear that Stringfellow is not suggesting that these institutions are necessarily demonic nor that the people who work for these institutions are demonic. He is not pointing at any particular country, corporation, or institutional church. Stringfellow is not a libertarian populist who distrusts the establishment and sees the IRS and the United Nations as tools of the devil. But his observations make one realize how easy it is for institutions to take on a life of their own and for the individuals working within them to be “possessed”, to be sucked up and effectively silenced by the policies of the institution.

If he were alive today, Stringfellow would have seen evidence of demonic possession in the mortgage crisis, where people pursued policies that they knew were unsustainable, but they followed them because the policies brought short-term profits and were the basis for their job reviews. He would see evidence of demonic possession in pervasive sexual abuse of U.S. gymnastics team, where officials had received reports of sexual abuse for years but didn’t take steps to stop it. These are examples of individuals becoming possessed, losing their ability to speak, and thereby rendered powerless.

For both Peck and Stringfellow, the demonic can be exorcised only by speaking the truth. The demonic lives through lies, deceit, and silence. I add silence because the truth not spoken is oftentimes more damaging, more demonic, than speaking an outright lie.

And what is this truth we are to speak? Peck and Stringfellow both find this truth rooted in Jesus Christ, which is the same message found in the gospel reading: Jesus is God’s word to us that this world makes sense. The things of this world are fleeting, here one day and gone the next. That includes evil. The truth is that there is only one thing that is ultimate. There is only one thing that is invulnerable to the powers of the demonic. That ultimate is God and God’s love for us, made known in the person of Jesus Christ.

This sermon doesn’t really have a conclusion. To me, a conclusion implies that the point has been made and all the loose ends have been tied up. When it comes to the demonic, I have loose ends hanging out in every direction. My thoughts on it are about as neat and organized as my desk. That is, not very.

I guess, if nothing else, I have tried to persuade you that the idea of the demonic is not an outmoded world view to which we politely tip our hats because it’s in the Bible, but that the demonic is a present reality that confronts us and our society, a reality against which we by ourselves are often powerless, a reality that the truth of Christ can—and does—overcome.