

When Church Becomes Evil

Mark 1:21-28

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (Jan. 31) 2021

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Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religion, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed.

-Rev. Charles Kimball

Moral chaos encourages religious totalitarianism, just as civil chaos encourages dictatorship.

-Catherine M. Wallace

Hate is an expression of enslavement, even of self-enslavement... to be free, you have to let go of hate.

-Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

I don't know about you but I'm still reeling from the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. One of the most alarming and disconcerting things I saw were the several signs about the Christian faith and Jesus, such as, "Jesus is my savior; Trump is my president," with some people carrying their Bibles, while dressed in body armor and ready to go to battle. I was horrified seeing Jesus signs alongside gallows built by the insurrectionists.

Russell Moore, a Southern Baptist but who some of my trustworthy friends tell me is a serious and humble Christian, responded that what he saw was “not only dangerous and unpatriotic but also blasphemous, presenting a picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ that isn’t the gospel and is instead its exact reverse.”

This morning I want to talk about when church becomes evil, when church gets sick, corrupted, and becomes evil. Or to use Russell Moore’s words, when church becomes “blasphemous” – the exact reverse of Jesus Christ. This dangerous rise of White Christian Nationalism is the most flagrant example today.

But I also want to talk about our own response to such evil and corruption. As we well know, if we are not careful, we can easily become just as corrupted and hate filled as that which we oppose. So, let’s listen and learn.

In our Gospel reading this morning from Mark, immediately after calling his disciples – Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John – there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and these very new disciples walk up the shore to Capernaum. It is likely that Capernaum is the home to Peter, Andrew, James, and John and perhaps Jesus hangs out with them for a day or so until Sabbath comes.

On the Sabbath, the day of worship and rest, Jesus heads to the synagogue, or for our purposes today, he went to church. He goes to church and he teaches. Very quickly the people realize that this wandering rabbi from Nazareth has an authority they’ve never seen nor heard before.

The people recognize Jesus’ authority but don’t know why. But Mark says there was someone who knew exactly why. “Just then” a man with an unclean spirit, or possessed by a demon, or we might could say, addicted to the power of something deathly that was greater than himself, stands up and screams, “What are you about to do to us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know

who you are – you are the Holy One of God!” The other people don’t know who Jesus is, but the powers of Sin and Death know exactly who he is: The Holy One of God, God’s anointed.

Jesus doesn’t fool around. He rebukes the demonic spirit saying, “Be silent! Come out of him!” The spirit of death and evil throws the man down in convulsions and screams, dramatically coming out of him. Theologian William Placher said, “Evil spirits never have any problem knowing who Jesus is; ‘the demons believe—and shudder.’”

The people are in shock, in awe, saying things like, “Who is this guy from Nazareth who even the spiritual powers obey him?” Everyone was whispering and jabbering and talking excitedly. To say the least, Sunday dinner was unusual that day. “Man, you picked the wrong day to miss church! It was something! You should have been there!” And Mark adds that word spread throughout that part of Galilee about Jesus.

Let me encourage you not to get side-tracked over such things as “Well, this was about mental illness, and those primitive people didn’t know better.” Instead, let’s pay attention to what’s going on here and what Mark is trying to show us.

Remember this language of the “powers and principalities” that I often talk about. A short reminder is that the people of New Testament days were acutely aware that there was something larger than themselves within which they felt caught or trapped or enslaved.

French sociologist Jacques Ellul said that we can analyze and dissect everyone and everything but when all is said and done, counted and examined, “not everything can be accounted for... That residue is a spiritual power” (see Charles Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, p. 10).

New Testament scholar Walter Wink said the principalities and the powers are the spiritual dimension of institutions, corporate structures, and systems. They are the spirit of systems of domination and control which dehumanize, diminish, and destroy humanity and ultimately lead to death. The Apostle Paul sometimes used principalities and powers language and sometimes referred to them as the spirit of Sin and Death (Campbell, p. 10).

What’s going on here is that Jesus begins his ministry confronting, calling out, and challenging the spirit of Sin and Death in which the religious institutions of his day, this synagogue, are caught. Coming from outside the system, Jesus is challenging and exorcising the power of Death and Evil that holds captive a religious institution – a synagogue, or a church. Everyone is responsible and culpable – the people have learned to go along, just be a bystander and not get involved. The preachers are both caught yet also try to use the spirit of Death as a kind of control. At the same time, it is bigger than they are.

The great poet John Milton wrote they loved bondage with ease rather than strenuous liberty (*Samson Agonistes*, 270-271). Well, the people in this Capernaum synagogue had given up trying to fight the spirit of Death. Most likely they didn’t even notice it and just went along with it. They preferred bondage with ease.

It's not hard to get caught in this kind of enslavement. The world seems more and more chaotic and threatening with increasing discrepancies of wealth and power, climate change, pandemics, loss of old reliable ways of identity, surrounded by more and more people unlike us, who seem to be thrust upon us instantly and constantly through television and media or because they're moving into our neighborhoods. We seek solace and stability through social media with people "like us," while also going to church with people "like us" and hearing that our fears are justified. We feel that our American "way of life," especially our White way of life, is being taken from us and we need to take it back. Even our best intentions and efforts to do good are hardened into biases and fears and become twisted – over time. We are frustrated and hurting, and we empathize with the suffering of others like us and are angry – perhaps justifiably so. But over time, our righteous anger eats away at us until it becomes rage and hatred that consumes us. Meanwhile, the preacher keeps telling us that God is on our side and we can do God's will by taking back control. Over time, our spiritual sickness turns to spiritual death and evil.

White Christian nationalism is the power of Sin, Death, and Evil. Nationalism is the belief in the superiority and exceptionalism of the nation, the tribe, or the race. White Christian nationalism combines the perceived exceptionalism of Whiteness and Christianity with that of America and often enough seeks to use coercion and violence as a tool. All too much White Christian nationalism believes in the myth of redemptive violence, which means that it believes that violence can solve our problems.

All this goes way back further than America. Indeed, most reputable theologians and historians of Christianity trace most of these perversions of our

faith back to the early fourth century when Constantine became emperor of the Roman Empire and declared himself Christian.

There is an old rule of thumb question that is always useful to ask about any institution or organization, especially religious ones. *How does that institution change when it gets power?* In the case of Christianity, here was a relatively small religious group, which for three centuries was devoted to the suffering servant Jesus Christ, and in faithfulness to Jesus they practiced this same suffering servanthood, forgiveness, and love of enemies. They refused to take up arms and refused to take oaths to anyone or anything other than their oath in baptism to Christ. They served the needy and the dying, even at great risk to themselves and shared their lives with each other.

But when the emperor declared himself Christian, and within the next century, Christianity became the official religion of the empire, everything changed. Suddenly, it meant running things, control, and using violence to maintain control, and for the most part, never questioning that the empire was run on the backs of slavery and exploited labor. From the perspective of those in power, it always meant control and power for good reasons. Indeed, we believed it was God's will and God's purpose that our empire, our nation, our people and our way of life was in charge because we believed that it was through our empire or nation or people that God was bringing salvation to the world. Change the name of the empire or nation: Rome, Holy Roman Empire, Spain or France or the British Empire, Russia, the Third Reich, Serbia, America or the Confederacy, on and on – you get the idea. We can change the name and still get the same mentality that says God's will is for us and our people to be God's instruments in bringing salvation to the world. And in order to do that, we must be in control and take back control.

Working hand-in-glove with nationalistic power across the centuries has been a kind of Gnosticism that says the essence of religion is individual proper knowledge which shows up as individual proper belief or proper experience. In other words, church becomes where we believe the proper things and have absolute truth, and/or also have Jesus in our individual hearts, then everything else becomes determined by our Whiteness and our Americanness.

Which means that the *end* of being in control or taking back control justifies any *means*. We can lynch black men on Saturday but be in church on Sunday and see no discrepancy. We can send Jews to the gas chambers but rationalize that we are doing so to save and redeem our people, our land, and our nation, and we show up in church and hear the preachers tell us it is God's will. We are part and parcel of an economy that is built upon exploitation and extraction and competition that destroys poor people and destroys the earth and the earth's climate, and we see nothing wrong.

Meanwhile, we are dying, and some of us realize that we are dying a slow spiritual death, but we cannot get out. "This is the real world," we say. Or "This is the price of doing business." We are dying and this is killing the planet and killing people, but we see no alternative.

And many of us recognize the blasphemy and danger of White Christian nationalism but feel overwhelmed by it all. We are in despair because we feel helpless. Our rage is destroying us, and we too are caught and enslaved.

Hear the gospel: Jesus Christ comes among us from outside. We are locked inside but Christ comes and unlocks the door and calls us to follow him. He breaks the power of Sin and Death and sets the captives free!

Jesus shows up, rebukes us and the sick, corrupt, and deathly system we're in and which overwhelms us. Jesus says, "Keep silent! Shut up. Listen."

Bonhoeffer was in prison for standing against the fascism and nationalism that enslaved the German church and people and destroyed the Jews. He wrote, "The time of words is over. Our witness must now be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. E. Bethge).

I've told this story before but hear it again. My dear friend Charlie Johnson was in seminary and was riding in the backseat while a friend drove Morton Kelsey, an Anglican priest who had given lectures, back to the airport. Kelsey asked Charlie what he did and hoped to do. Charlie said he was a pastor. Charlie remembers Kelsey turning in his seat to face him in the back, raising his voice, "Young man, you are surrounded by evil! Each and every day you must be in touch with the Living Christ!"

Kelsey and Bonhoeffer are both telling us that we must immerse ourselves in the Living Christ – everyday! The more we struggle against the powers of Evil and Death we become more deeply enmeshed in Evil and Death. Our hope and the good news of the gospel is that instead of fighting the powers, our first job, our first calling is to be with Jesus, walk with Jesus, serve like Jesus, and learn to see and act like Jesus. We let Jesus fight the powers of Death. We are to stick with him.

I've read that FBI agents and Treasury Dept. agents are trained in how to detect counterfeit bills, not by spending a lot of time studying counterfeit bills. Instead, they spend immense time memorizing the original dollar bill. They internalize every detail of the real thing – its weight, its feel, its smell, its look, and then when faced with a counterfeit, they immediately and intuitively know it is fake without detailed analysis (see Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, p. 90).

Likewise, I encourage you to spend time with the true and authentic Living God. The real suffering servant Lord, who rules from the Cross, who wins by losing, who triumphs by washing feet, who dies rather than kill. When we immerse ourselves in this real Living God, we will easily know the fake when we have to deal with it.

So, we shut up and listen. We learn to practice contemplative prayer, which is a way of giving up our power, giving up control to God.

And in the same way, we practice listening to others. We give up power and control and listen to those who are being ground down and cast off. We learn to listen to those who are suffering as we walk alongside of them, even suffering with them. We listen to those who are the victims of White Supremacy and who have been bullied and judged because they are LGBTQ or those who live in poverty.

And therefore, when we pray, we are very conscious that our suffering sisters and brothers are alongside of us. We pray with them in mind.

Bonhoeffer said, “prayer and righteous action.” In other words, after praying we do something. But here’s the thing: it does not need to be something big. In fact, it needs to be simple and small and humble. As Andre Trocme put it to his congregation in Le Chambon, when confronting the Nazis: Every day “look for opportunities to make *little* moves against destructiveness” (see Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, p. 85). And when we do something, however humble and small, we do it as an act of prayer. We offer it to Christ Jesus, the Living God.

There is an old story of an elderly monk teaching his novices: “When I was young, I thought I could change the world. Years later, I thought, if I can change a few people, I can change the world. Now that I am old, I realize I can only change myself. If I had only started by changing myself, I could have changed the world.”

During these Covid days there is so much we cannot do. But one thing we can do is allow God to change us. We offer our lives to the crucified and resurrected Christ Jesus in prayer and righteous action.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.