

WHAT WE CAME TO DO

Mark 1: 21-28

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BEHOLD, THE D.S.M. 5

In 2012, the American Psychiatric Association completed the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorders, also known as the D.S.M. This first major revision in the D.S.M. in seventeen years was published early in 2013 (nearly eleven years ago) and caused something of a stir.

Some people in the mental health field were concerned that real mental health disorders were left out or downplayed in the manual and people who suffer from those disorders would not be able to receive treatment because their insurance companies would not pay for it.

Others were concerned that some mental health disorders were so broadly defined that people exhibiting normal behaviors, especially children and youth, would be diagnosed, labeled, and medicated as though they were mentally ill.

Battles are still being fought over the manual's entries on grief and autism.

How much grief is normal? Is "normal" grief the same for everyone? How debilitating must normal grief over the loss of a loved one become before it is classified as depression and treated with medication and therapy?

Should Asperger syndrome be included in the autism spectrum or should it be classified as a separate and different disorder? Some studies have concluded that one out of every one hundred children is autistic. Can that really be the case or are the symptoms so broadly defined that they include some people who are just very shy or socially awkward? What about children who are diagnosed as autistic and then seem to outgrow the symptoms? Can a person really outgrow autism, or were they really autistic in the first place?

The debates will, no doubt, continue until the next edition of the DSM is published, probably in 2033 or so. And, in the meantime, the chances are that we or someone we love will probably be affected by the decisions that were made by the American Psychiatric Association ten years ago.

But no matter what direction the debate takes, no matter what disorders are included in and defined by the D.S.M. we are not likely to see the words "demonic possession" make their way into it as an accepted diagnosis. It's probably also safe to say that, had any of the doctors treating my brother that Christmas, fifty years ago, suggested that his illness was caused by a demon, my parents would have, quite understandably, bundled up their sick child and fled to another hospital as quickly as they could go.

We are, after all, modern, scientific, twenty-first century thinkers. We don't believe in ghosts or goblins or zombies or the boogeyman, we understand the work of germs and viruses; we have seen men walk on the moon; we have split the atom, and we do not check our brains at the door when we enter the church.

DEMONS EVERYWHERE

People who lived in the first century were not so lucky. They didn't know from germs or viruses or molecules or atoms. They lived in a flat, "three story," universe which they explained with myth and story. And one of the most prominent myths of that age was that of demonic possession. This was especially true when the case before them seemed hopeless.

Things that were unexplainable, incurable, irreversible, and non-rational, especially things that caused people to indulge in self-destructive behaviors like rolling in fires, running around naked, and howling at the moon were attributed to other-worldly agencies.

If such behavior was not caused by something visible in this world, they reasoned, then it must be caused by something invisible from another world. If no power of this world could affect a cure, then the cure must come from another, transcendent power.

This was how people in the ancient world explained and dealt with what we, today, understand as epilepsy, schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, paranoia, autism, delirium tremens, Tourette's Syndrome all manner of convulsive disorders, developmental disabilities, and complex unexplainable behaviors. They did not have sufficient information and data to make proper diagnoses.

Today, our scientific, medical diagnoses do not include demonic possession but, as the current debate over the D.S.M. indicates, even with all of the data that modern education and technology affords us, neither do we have all the answers to every question. We struggle to describe and define the full depth and breadth of the human condition. Consistently accurate diagnoses still sometimes elude us and, even in the 21st century, we often find ourselves reduced to the use of myth and metaphor.

And that's when the language of demonic possession returns to us.

How else can we speak of addiction? A couple of weeks ago I was suffering from the insomnia that has plagued me most of my adult life and found myself watching television at 3 o'clock in the morning. The program was "Frontline" the PBS series that does in-depth studies of various topics and this night the subject at hand was the methamphetamine, or crystal meth epidemic which has swept across this country in the past 30 or so years. One of the things they did on the program was show pictures of meth addicts. First, they would show a picture of the person, often from a high school yearbook, before they became addicted, usually a healthy, often attractive person looking at the camera.

Then they used what is called "morph" technology to show the destructive metamorphosis that happened to the faces of crystal meth addicts. We saw the healthy, attractive face slowly collapse in on itself, the cheeks become sunken, the eyes become dark and empty, the teeth rotten and falling out, the skin covered with scars and sores.

When I saw those pictures all I could think of was "The Exorcist." These were the images of people possessed by demons. And the demon's name was meth amphetamine addiction.

If you have ever seen an alcoholic suffering from delirium tremens (DT's), seeing monsters that aren't there and feeling invisible bugs crawling on their skin, I think you would agree that they resemble nothing so much as a person possessed by a demon.

When we encounter a homeless person who has not, for whatever reason, taken their medication walking down the street arguing with voices only they can hear and pushing away people only they can see, we speak quite reasonably of them as being haunted by their own private and personal demons.

In fact, those are the words, those are the metaphors we use to describe any psychological or emotional pain that we suffer, be it grief, regret, guilt, illness, or despair. These, we say, are the private demons that possess modern souls.

EXORCISM

The question for those of us who follow Jesus and claim him as Lord is this: How did he relate to those who knew the full depth and breadth of hopelessness? How did he approach those who wrestled with demons? And, how shall we?

Scripture suggests that there is a proscribed process for effective exorcism, one that may, on the metaphorical level, be helpful to us, today, as we seek to exorcise the demons that torment and possess our souls and the souls of those we love.

First, Jesus named the demon.

In primitive, first century, Middle Eastern culture, names had power. To know a person's name when they didn't know yours gave you power over them. People believed that this was also the case with powers that lived on other than our temporal plane.

Read the New Testament accounts of Jesus facing off with demons and you hear, over and over, this sort of duel over who knows whose name. The demon knows who Jesus is but, ah-ha, Jesus knows the demon's name, too. Advantage Jesus! Or, when Jesus confronts a person who is demonically possessed, he will first seek to know the demon's name before he decides what to do about it.

This morning's account speaks about exorcisms only in the broad, general sense and gives no specific examples, but when specific stories are recounted, this is almost always the case.

Secondly, after Jesus knows the name of the demon, he tells the demon to be quiet and then casts it out. A couple of observations may be relevant, here.

One is this: Demons have power only so long as they are allowed to speak. Shut them up and you declaw them.

Note also that Jesus does not cast out every demon in every case. In the message we read this morning it says: "That evening they brought to him *all* who were sick or possessed with

demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured **many** who were sick with various diseases, and cast out **many** demons.” (emphasis added)

They brought **ALL**. He cured **MANY**. Do you hear the difference?

So, even Jesus did not cure every case and cast out every demon. Some were, for whatever reasons, not curable, not exorcise-able.

It seems apparent, then, that if we are to follow Jesus in this business of demonic possession and exorcism, we would be about the business of two things:

First, we name the demon. That is, we make a correct diagnosis.

Sometimes the demon we are facing is complex and difficult, like mental illness or addiction. Sometimes the demons we face are chronic and progressive, even fatal, like alcoholism. Other times, they are small, impish figures like gluttony, or meanness, or selfishness, or pride, or just plain old orneriness.

Whatever the demon, we must summon within ourselves the courage to name it. Call it what it is. Identify it so all can see it. And then mute it.

This is tough for Christians, I know. Many of us have grown up being told that being blunt is rude. We were taught to whisper about unpleasant things: “Oh, bless her heart, she’s *mentally ill*.” Or, “He’s kind of *ornery and mean*.” We treat the demonic with deference, we tiptoe around the destructive, we are extra polite to bullies and we step aside for tyrants, we bow to oppressors and we back away from aggressors and intimidators. This is true in our personal, private lives. And it is also true in our corporate lives as well.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman, the late author and family systems therapist, influenced countless people, including thousands of clergy from every denomination, not the least of which is your pastor. Friedman wrote and taught about how human systems operate, be it a nuclear family, a nation, a baseball team, or an order of monks, and he provided deep and often witty insight for those interested in improving the health of those systems.

About 25 years ago I was privileged to hear Rabbi Friedman speak at a continuing education event and one of the things he said has stuck with me ever since: He remarked upon how, in many churches, people put up with a lot of unkind and unpleasant behavior out of a vague notion that it would be “un-Christian” to confront those who are behaving poorly. And, indeed, he continued, often in synagogues, people are unwilling to hold one another accountable for bad and inappropriate behavior, out of the very same vague notion that it would be “un-Christian” to do so.

Demons can possess a body politic, a group of people, even a church. And, often, rather than naming those demons, we Christians back away and relinquish power to them. We defer to the most destructive, dysfunctional, meanest, nastiest person in the room, we turn over control of the process to the most hateful, harmful, implacable, spiteful person in the group because, somehow, we have come to believe that it is the “Christian thing to do.”

And it may be Christian but it isn't Christ-like.

Jesus named demons and then he cast them out.

That's the **second** way we follow him. **We cast demons out.**

Jesus usually did that simply by his own authority. Sometimes we can do that. We can cast out one of our contemporary demons simply by the power of our own will and authority.

Roughly ten percent of alcoholics just, one day, stop drinking. We have all known cigarette smokers who simply quit smoking. Mean people see the error of their ways and decide to stop being mean. Fat people go on diets and get thin.

But most of us need help in exorcising our personal demons. We need the help of a loving family or community who will hold our hand when the going gets tough. We need the help of God to give us strength we don't feel and insight we don't have. That's why there are things like AA and Alanon and Weight Watchers. That's why there's such a thing as a church. We need each other's help.

Remember, in the story, all were brought to him and many were healed.

That's part of this process, too. We know that sometimes, some things don't get healed, at least not in this life and not permanently.

Perhaps the demon your family is facing is Alzheimer's disease. Maybe the demon called cancer has invaded the body of one you love. Maybe it's schizophrenia or some other intractable illness, addiction, or disability. And maybe that demon will never be fully exorcised.

Maybe the exorcism will be short lived – a week, or a day, or even just a few moments. Sometimes we count our victories in moments, don't we? But they are no less victories for the brevity that we have them.

Jesus named demons and, in doing so, demonstrated his power over them. And he used that power to cast them out. This naming and casting out is the activity to which we, as his followers, aspire as we confront the figurative demons which haunt and possess modern souls. It is diagnoses and treatment of the spiritual kind and it is inseparable from the gospel which we proclaim. It is how we show his love to those who are, even today, possessed. It is, after all, what we are here to do.

AMEN