

## *Healing Demons*

*Psalm 111*

*Mark 1: 21-28*

*February 1, 2009*

*United Memorial – Halifax, Nova Scotia*

Would you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

I have written at least 3 sermons this week!

It seemed as if each time I thought I had figured out what to preach this week, something else came about and I thought I had to address that.

There was the continuing bleak economic news...

There was the federal budget...

The conviction of Karissa Boudreau's mother for killing her last winter.

And then this morning... the news that another Canadian soldier has been killed in Afghanistan.

And I kept on asking myself... in the light of all this and more... what does our gospel have to say?

Mark's gospel is so compact that each passage is absolutely stuffed with a variety of theme and points.

Today we heard about Jesus teaching in the synagogue with authority... where he encountered a man with an unclean spirit and called upon the spirit to come out and leave the man alone.

In the United Church, we don't talk about demons or unclean spirits much these days.

And perhaps many of us don't think they exist.

And certainly not in good church people such as ourselves.

But what if we think of demons or unclean spirits more in a metaphorical sense.

What are the things within ourselves that Jesus would call out of us in order to heal us?

What is it that we need to have Jesus say, with authority, "Be silent, and come out!"

Fear can be an unclean spirit... one with which I struggle at times...

Fear of having enough money in retirement.

One of my nephews is slated to go to Afghanistan next September and I not only fear for his life, but also for how whatever experiences he has there will impact the rest of his life.

I fear the anger in my heart and soul when a mother kills her child... and whenever violence and death are seen as a solution.

These are fears that fill me up and crowd out room for love and compassion... fear that again and again I call out to Jesus, recognizing him as one who can offer healing, and ask for his help.

Those are some of my very personal, individual demons or unclean spirits and I am sure each and every one of us has them.

What are some of your fears or demons or unclean spirits that you would ask for healing?

But beyond individuals, what are the demons or unclean spirits that our society and churches have that can be healed with turning towards Jesus and opening ourselves to having him command the demon to come out of us.

*For example our inclination toward excluding others in terms of gender, education, age, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, accent, athletic ability, appearance, social standing and so on.*

*Inwardism is another spirit of uncleanness among us human types.*

*It's autonomy run amok... Me and Jesus... Me and my concerns, needs, hopes, fears, dreams, my salvation... I raised this in more detail last week when I spoke about our worship being more than a collection of individuals' preferences and desires.*

*A consciousness that lives in its own universe, obsesses with its own well-being, and totally fails to see the other person's needs as one's own.*

*Outwardism is the other side of the coin. The person who sacrifices his or her own well-being for the sake of others, and does so habitually.*

*The person who depends completely on what others think, how others perceive him or her, who has no identifiable self that can relate with other identifiable selves.*

*The need for control comes in for demonic mention. Oh, we all want to control our own space, to some extent at least; sometimes we get to grasping for control over others.*

*Traditionalism (this is the way we've always done it).*

*Abuse in the family.*

*Greed...*

*The need to label people and stuff them into convenient boxes so we can deal with them (a variation on the control theme).*

*When we look to the gospel, we have Jesus coming to us in our uncleanness and offering a realm of health and well-being, he is knocking on the door, seeking to encircle our lives. (Adapted from a posting by Bill Lemosy, Midrash, January 31, 2009)*

And we are able to do that because we come to worship, we hear stories and refreshed and renewed, we can go out to serve our world.

Last week, I spoke of how worship matters... that title arose out of a United Church Worship & Music Symposium that I attended a couple of years ago, which was entitled Worship Matters!

I have to tell you that it was amazing... uplifting worship in a variety of styles, stimulating keynote speakers and captivating workshops.

It was wonderful to have the experience of worshipping instead of leading worship... to have interaction with colleagues who also take worship preparation seriously.

I want to tell you a story of a church in Toronto... a church not unlike ours... a church that was aging... one with fear for the future... the neighbourhood had changed around it... in a sanctuary that could seat 1000, they were getting about 50 in worship on a Sunday morning.

They called Cheri DeNovo to be their minister...

During the first year she continually preached about God's inclusive love... love for all God's people, not just the middle and upper class people who had traditionally formed the membership of this church.

They tried a variety of things, contemporary worship, Taizé, coffee house and so on.

At the end of the year, they evaluated how they were doing and while they had picked up a family here and there, there had also been a couple of deaths of the original members and so their attendance and participation would remain about the same...

After prayer and discernment, they decided to look at the community in which they lived and see who needed the message of God's unending and unfailing love.

In her community of downtown Toronto, it was the homeless community that was living on her doorstep... often battling addictions and mental illness. There were also many gay/lesbian/transgendered people....

Unlike us, they were facing a financial crunch, one in which they only had enough money to maintain the status quo for another year.

And they decided if they only had enough money to survive another year, they would do it in style, to live out their faith, which said Love God, Love your neighbour as yourself.

On a Wednesday evening they put up a sign saying 'Come join us for supper.'

They bought President's Choice Lasagna, some Caesar salad and garlic bread and opened the doors.

The first Wednesday a few folks wandered in, the next a few more and of course the word spread... most of these folks who had never darkened the door of the church on Sunday morning... and many of them needed to know that God loved them...

And more came, and more came...

And then, something happened... word got around in the community that this is what the church was doing and you know what happened?

The middle and upper class people who can contribute financially started coming to church... and let's face it, ministry cannot take place without financial support.

And you know why they started to come?

Because they saw the church as a community of people who cared and were demonstrating God's love for all people.

They saw the church as a powerful example of the kinds of values that they wanted their children to have.

They experienced the church as a place in which all were accepted, all were valued, all were loved.

And when Cheri left that church, to enter politics, the sanctuary was full most Sundays.

And it started with worship... a community that heard God's call to be hospitable and welcoming, not just to those like them... but to the community in which they lived. *(Story heard from Cheri at Worship Matters 2007, any errors are mine)*

There are people in our community who experience hunger and homelessness in it, and there are people in this community who have never been invited to come and experience worship and encounter God... and find out the kinds of things that we support outside of our church walls...

The kinds of things we support because that is what God calls us to do!

The kind of things we support because it is a way of being part of Jesus' message to cast out the demons and unclean spirits that would bind us.

Like the money we send to the Mission & Service Fund to support ministry with people around the country and around the world.

Like the many things that the UCW has initiated which are then supported by our entire faith community. Things such as

- Providing the Brunswick Street Mission, Phoenix House and Adsum House with clothing, quilts, and food.
- Collecting food for the Ward 5 Food bank.
- Collecting glasses for the CNIB to be refurbished
- The prayer shawl ministry that has just started.
- Knitting for newborns ad the IWK.
- Cooking food for suppers for ARC Ministries.
- Financially supporting, the Angola Memorial Scholarship Fund, Phoenix House, Stepping Stone, Coverdale and Chaplaincy at MSVU and Dalhousie.
- Pastoral care that addresses hurts both within and beyond the walls of this building.
- And there are probably more....

When I told folks that I was trying to get a handle on the ministry that was going on beyond these walls, and got some responses, I was filled with awe and wonder...

These are the kinds of ministries and healing actions that are to be celebrated... to be shared and invite others into these ministries, not keep them hidden so that only a few know about them. This is our calling...to offer Jesus' healing to the hurting...

What is the healing that this community that we reside in needs?

How can we raise our visibility in the community as a church who is concerned about those beyond our four walls?

Who in the community beyond these walls in desperate need of the message of God's love and acceptance?

I don't know... although I have some ideas and I am sure that many of you do as well...

Some of this will come out of the Visioning process that we will start next fall...

One of the other things that I learned at Worship Matters is this:

Everything we need to accomplish the work that God has for us is right here.

I'll say that again: Everything we need to accomplish the work that God has for us is right here.

God doesn't set us up for failure... we have everything we need to make a difference in our world.

We have everything we need to be healed and to offer Jesus' healing.

Thanks be to God, amen.

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