

Fighting Our Demons

So Jesus performs an exorcism and he comes to a town. He has just, if you remember and if you're following Luke, He's healed the centurion slave, He has healed the widow's son, He has traveled across the lake and made it calm and so far nobody really knows exactly who Jesus is. He lands in a foreign place across the lake and a man possessed by demons comes up to him and the demons are really the first to say "You're Jesus the son of God." Jesus cast out the demon and the town's people are thrilled- no they're not thrilled-they're frightened and they actually encourage Jesus to leave after doing such a great thing. It's a pretty interesting text.

You know I always approach the text each week with: what makes me curious. A couple things this week made me curious but first and foremost, this whole topic of Exorcism, demonic possession, what does that mean and what does this text have to do with us today? Is that something that we could still apply to today's world or is this something that's best left back 2000 years ago? And as I looked at it I thought "Yes, this is about demonic possession," and I don't think that's the entire story here but I think in the same way that we have seen an evolution in healthcare, where we can do a lot of great things with medicine now that we couldn't do many years ago right? I believe that's God advancing healing and I believe Mental Health is the same thing. I think mental health has had an evolution, I think it needs more evolution and I think that many people interpret this story as a Mental Health issue. I would say I think it's a little bit more complicated than just that. And then the question is: Is there a possibility or an existence of demonic possession. And people ask me what I think on that and that is a medieval concept for most people. It's unlike angels so they say "What's your take on this whole idea? Could there be demonic possession or evil in today's world?" And my answer is "Yes." I actually believe it exists. I think it's rare. I've certainly been around people who exhibit some behavior you could call Mental Health but it sort of goes into something even beyond that.

So the issue of possession, do I think it exists? I do, but I think it is rare and I recently read a report of a psychologist at a prison who said that his strategy for dealing with one person's mental illness was to talk to the being that was representing him. And he said "I just decided to talk to it because I decided to apply, like it was a spiritual being of some kind; its own person. And that's how he did the therapy and they arranged it so that the patient could knock on his window and get right in to get treated whenever that voice came. And he saw dramatic health. And then one day he says that the patient came to him and said "They want to talk to you." And he said "Who? What? What?" He said "They, the spirits want to talk to you. They're very frustrated by what we're doing together; they're angry." And so he tells a story where they literally say- a voice comes out and says "You're not supposed to know we're here, leave us alone, we were doing what we were doing." So this therapist was describing it just as a 'demonic possession.' Do I think that exists? Yes. In our tradition, we do believe in demonic presence. We don't believe in say 'a devil,' but we do believe that the forces of evil can be active.

So what's the lesson for us today? Should we be involved with exorcisms? I don't think that's the teaching for us today so much, as I think it's an example from Jesus of how to deal with evil. And Jesus deals with evil with love, but that's not how evil thrives; evil thrives on fear. And if you've noticed this within yourself and within our society, when you're anxious or nervous and you get fearful, it's not your better angels that comes out, at least that's my experience. Now does this apply to our world today? Well we have become so critical of each other in our culture that we almost can't have a common conversation as a country and this is happening around the world. And what's the phrase we use when people are really hyper-partisan or really fighting against each other? The phrase we use is 'demonization,' right?" You demonize the other. And I do find that when we are being asked to grow spiritually, very often, we look out to the other person and say "They are wrong, they need to change, it's them and they are bad." And I think that the challenge here is that when Jesus confronted this demon He said "Who are you;" He

identified it by name. And I think that's the challenge for each of us to identify it by name.

You can't preach from a text such as this during this week when we have seen, really, from my personal perspective, evil in the world, in that man who murdered innocent people at a dance club in Orlando last weekend, who took a gun over the stall as people were begging for mercy and laughed and texted his wife and texted the media to make sure they were paying attention. That to me is evil, that to me would be demonic and it gives us an opportunity to respond. Do we respond in fear or do we respond in love? And so what are we doing as a country? One, we all went to our sides to blame the other right? We immediately went to our corners and said "They're the problem it's the NRA!" "No they're the problem, it's the Muslims!" "No they're the problem it's..." And each side kind of quickly moved to comfortable positions of demonization of the other. What can we learn from it? I think that we can move beyond demonization and we can look within ourselves. It is a sad reality that many people couldn't even say that it was a gay club in the media.

I was on MSNBC this morning on the AM Joy Show on this very topic and the question was 'Why are religious leaders and particularly Republicans, unable to even say that it was a gay club? And the answer, sadly, this is really sad is that because of people's religious beliefs, Christianity has now become perceived for many as this is "I must be anti-gay therefore I can't say anything nice about people murdered at a dance club." That's an opportunity for us to reflect as Christians, not to point to anybody else but we need to change and evolve. Many of the people in the club itself didn't use the real names and the reason is because they are from Latino Community, the black community and those churches can also be very homophobic, so many were outed in their death. It was very sad, it's very sad. This could be an opportunity for all of us, particularly for Christians to reflect and say "Wow, how did we get to this point?" We need to grow beyond this; we need to look within ourselves. This is certainly not the Gospel of Jesus

that would make us uncomfortable standing with an impure and solid support of the victims of that atrocious, atrocious crime. And I think we have to be careful not to fall to our fears. Terrorism is a form of evil, it's a very clever form of evil because it does something very specific- it scares everybody. And we cannot fall prey to those fears, fears that then say things like "This is how I have to treat Muslims and this is how I'm going to treat this group and that group and we start demonizing each other. We have to in my opinion, bring more love when we're confronting evil.

It's interesting in the end of the story in the gospel, the town's people are not happy about what Jesus has done. And that's also true. When love is brought into a situation, very often, we don't really want it; we'd rather go back to our old ways. They were comfortable with that man running around the sepulchers, screaming. That's what they were used to and when he was cured they are unhappy. So let's beware of that too; that when we do bring change into the world it will not often be brought with open arms, but love as a choice versus fear when we confront evil.

So I believe that this week, this text and the events in our life do give us a challenge to, when we confront in our own lives, those trigger moments where we're sort of possessed, we're embarrassed by how we respond. Where did that come from; that moment when we're facing evil to overcome it with the Lord's help and through love.

Amen.

