

Sermon for Sunday, February 1, 2009

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm Psalm 111

Second Lesson 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Gospel Mark 1:21-28

In today's gospel lesson, we hear the story of Jesus healing a man possessed by an evil spirit. It's a classic tale of good versus evil, and even if we were to stop on the surface level of this story, it would still hold deep meaning for us. The amazing story we heard this morning not only acknowledges the healing power of Jesus, but also recognizes his godly authority over all of the forces in the world—both good and bad.

In Jesus' day, demonic possession was a given; people believed that, not only was possession a possibility, it was likely if someone was being punished for doing something wrong. If a person was thought to be possessed by an evil spirit, they were automatically made ritually unclean in the eyes of the community, and were shunned just like lepers and Samaritans were shunned.

In other words, they were viewed as less than human.

The healing that takes place in the synagogue is preceded by the evil spirit recognizing Jesus for who he really is—the Son of God, ready and willing to return humanity to those who lost it (or who are in danger of losing it).

This was all too much for the evil spirit to bear, of course; you can almost feel the fear in the evil spirit's words to Jesus, acknowledging Jesus' control over every force in the universe.

The evil spirit departs from the tormented man.

As I've said, this story works on even its most elementary level. Yet, as with everything else about Jesus, there's more here than meets the eye.

We all carry our evil spirits and demons with us, don't we? They might not be as recognizable as the evil spirit that Jesus ousted in today's gospel lesson, but they're still just as powerful—and they're able to take away our humanity just as quickly as a possession does.

As Jesus recognized, we can become something other than what we were meant to be as human being; we can allow ourselves to become circumvented from God by our attitudes and emotions, by our priorities and our lack of discernment. Quite literally, we too can be possessed by the forces of a society that keeps us in slavery by touting the next big crisis, the next big fear, the next big wave of anxiety that brings us to our knees.

Especially nowadays, we are asked to live into a sense of scarcity—there's not enough to go around, our basic needs will not be met, our livelihoods are in danger. We insist that our spouses make more money, that our children become financially secure so that they can take care of us, and that our worlds become fortresses against the uncertainty of our lives.

This sense of scarcity can possess us and blind us to what's actually real in our lives. We live in fear, which can then transform itself into anger and denial about our condition. We don't feel good about who we are or what we're becoming, and so we lash out at others, berating them for not recognizing our own hurt and pain.

This is possession, too. It may not be as dramatic as the possession found in today's gospel lesson, but it's possession none-the-less.

Into this sense of scarcity comes Jesus, bringing with him not only a healing touch but Good News as well: You don't have to be possessed by a sense of scarcity. You have everything you need to live a life full of abundance. You have everything you need to live joyously. You have everything you need to live gracefully.

There is no despair unless we allow ourselves to despair. We make our own realities, and then we try to bend others to fit those realities, no matter what the cost. Today, Jesus comes to us through the gospel lesson we heard and tells us that there's only one reality—God's. He touches us with his healing words, and the demons of self-illusion are gone. The only thing that's left is God.

When we recognize this, we fall down on our knees again, not because of the burden of scarcity and anxiety that drives us, but because of the absolute and total love that God—through Jesus Christ—has for us all.

And, it's there on our knees that we say:

Amen.

©Copyright 2009 Tim Ljunggren