

Unclean Spirits in the Church  
Mark 1:21-28

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*Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. Mk. 1:23*

Today's Bible story puts before us a situation in which an unclean spirit had somehow made its way into the synagogue at Capernaum. For our purposes today let's Christianize this story and situate the scene not in the synagogue but in the church; and let us contemporize the story and think of the unclean spirit as any attitude or idea that is hostile to God and disruptive of the ideal flow of congregational life.

We'd like to think of the church as a community free of negativity and the disruptiveness of wrongheadedness and wrong heartedness, but we have been around churches long enough to realize congregations are flawed, human institutions far from perfect. They can be infiltrated by ideas and attitudes disruptive to faithfulness, just as the synagogue at Capernaum was infiltrated by an evil spirit. Whatever these contemporary unclean spirits in the church are, they are best removed.

What might be some of these unclean spirits in churches today? I suppose we could draw upon another Bible story, one just a little further along in the Gospel According to Mark, and say that the name of the unclean spirit infiltrating the church today is Legion, because there are so many of them (Mk. 5:9). Rather than give an exhaustive list which would be too exhausting for a single sermon, I will name four that are regularly encountered and easily recognized.

*Complacency is an unclean spirit we should remove from the church.*

Complacency<sup>1</sup> is near complete satisfaction with what is. The spirit of complacency has no desire for change because it sees no need for change. The spirit of complacency surmises that all is well when all is merely familiar. The time for action is not now, according to the spirit of complacency; it prefers to let well enough alone.

Complacency has no place in the Master's mission. The unclean spirit in the synagogue in Capernaum butted heads with Jesus almost immediately, for the two were that much at odds. It is that way with the spirit of complacency as well. Jesus and complacency are completely at odds; if you are going to love one you have to hate the other. Complacency has no place in the Master's mission because his work is to change lives. In his inaugural address when he commenced his work in Nazareth he said,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

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<sup>1</sup> I offer here my own development of the subject of complacency and the subsequent subject of despair, but the subjects of complacency and despair are suggested by James S. Stewart, *The River of Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), p. 39ff.

and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk. 4:18-19)

There is no room for complacency in a mission like that. Any thought of a place for complacency in the church has to fade away when we remember that Jesus also said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Mt. 10:34)

It is alright to like a congregation and to love its program, but complacency can never be a ruling spirit in the church. We Christians are meant to be a people sent on Christ's mission of change. We are not meant to be a people coddled in a life of comfort.

*Despair is an unclean spirit we should remove from the church.*

The spirit of despair is the near opposite of the spirit of complacency. The spirit of complacency thinks everything is fine the way it is; the spirit of despair groans that everything is off that that there is no way to set it right. A realistic spirit sees there is a cloud over us; a despairing spirit believes the cloud will never break. According to the spirit of despair, every prospect on the horizon is bleak and every possibility is doomed. When asked to think of better days, the spirit of despair is all historian and no futurist: all the better days are in past and none are on the horizon.

Despair is easy to come by, particularly in these pandemic days when everything is closed. It is easy to come by when our country is hit hard with shattering division.

We are not the first to be infiltrated by the spirit of despair. There was once a missionary to China by the name of James Gilmour (1843-1891). I recently read a portion of his diary that a favorite preacher of mine quoted way back in 1910. When Gilmour first went to China from Scotland he was all thrills and hopes and dreams. "Several huts in sight!" he wrote in his diary; "O Lord . . . guide me . . . in preparing myself to teach the life and love of Christ Jesus!" What do you suppose his diary said years later? Packed churches? Vital programs? Streams of people coming to him for prayer and advice? No. There was none of that. The enthusiastic line about several huts in sight led years later to this despairing line: "I have seen no result. I have not . . . seen any one who even *wanted* to be Christian."<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who has ever planned a church program or prayed for its strength and vitality has come to despair like that. Despair is easy to come by for those who love the church. But despair as a ruling spirit has no place in the Master's mission. Of course, I am not speaking of something like clinical depression, you understand. That's something quite different. I am thinking of an outlook, a frame of mind, a basic framework for exploring the church's place in society and its potential for making a difference. The spirit of despair has no place in that mission of the Master, not when we remember he learned at his mother's knee "all things are possible with God" (Lk. 1:37; Mk. 9:23; Mt. 19:26).

*Inwardness is an unclean spirit we should remove from the church.*

The spirit of inwardness looks only to the church itself. I think it was Harry Emerson Fosdick once talked about a selfish little girl named Edith. He said she was like an island

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<sup>2</sup> John Henry Jowett, *The School of Calvary* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1910), p. 55-56. The emphasis is in the original.

bordered by Edith. Everything was about her. A church suffering from the spirit of inwardness is bordered in the same way, by its own programs on the one side and its own people on the other. It has no horizon beyond itself. It keeps with the walls of the church, the boundaries of the parish, and the interests of its membership.

The spirit of inwardness does to the church what Gen. George B. McClellan did to the Army of the Potomac in the days of the Civil War. McClellan supplied the army, outfitted the army, drilled the army, and trained the army, making it into a great force. But that is about all he did. He kept it idle. He did not advance it. He just outfitted it and supplied it and trained it; he didn't use it.<sup>3</sup>

So the church that is possessed by the spirit of inwardness does little of importance outside itself. I am reminded of a line from my home church's newsletter when I was a boy. It said that churches can be like someone who dresses up in a deep-sea diving suit only to pull out the plug of the bathtub. A New York minister complained at the start of the last century about churches that are no more far-reaching than advocating changes to the constitution of their cradle roll.<sup>4</sup>

This spirit of inwardness has no place in the Master's mission. He is the one who said, "those who want to save their life will lose it" (Mt. 16:25). He said, "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (Jn. 20:21). He told his people not to be stuck in this little place but to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). We cannot succumb to a spirit of inwardness and keep Christ's mission.

*Outwardness is an unclean spirit we should remove from the church.*

The spirit of outwardness over-compensates for the spirit of inwardness. For the sake of service and witness outside the fellowship it ignores the needs of the fellowship. It takes to the streets but neglects the pews. It nobly wants to break the grip of injustice in the world but it doesn't pause to tend to the broken and hurting within. The spirit of outwardness reduces religion to its ethical dimension. Its motto is "To believe is to care. To care is to do." And it calls people to take a stand. It organizes marches, stages protests, and writes placards for people to carry.

Now we need something of this spirit of outwardness if we are going to have the spirit of Christ. It is critically important to the Master's mission today. We have to send people into the field to do justice, to love kindness, and to labor for the causes of the Kingdom of God.

But we cannot let ourselves become overrun by this spirit. It is irresponsible to send people into mission without securing the supply-line of resources they need, including comfort for those who are wounded by life and the theological foundations that are necessary toward understanding why the church has the mission it does. If the spirit of inwardness is wrong because it never says "Go into the world" the spirit of outwardness is wrong because it never says to the church "Come away by yourselves and rest" (Mk. 6:31).

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<sup>3</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford, 1988), p. 348ff, 365, 426.

<sup>4</sup> Charles E. Jefferson, *The Building of the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), p. 13.

Looking back on the ground I have covered this morning I have named four attitudes that can infiltrate the church. None of them are evil or diabolical. But each one of them can be distracting in the sense that it can divert the church from its full life and health.

Way back in Capernaum of old, the congregation and community became amazed when Jesus rid the man of his unclean spirit who disrupted the life of the synagogue. Let us look to Jesus to help us be rid of the unclean spirits of complacency, despair, inwardness, and outwardness, together with other wrong ideas or half-truths that may afflict us. If we aren't complacent or despairing, totally inward or totally outward, but Christ-possessed, we can be an amazing church that does amazing things.