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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y4
4 Epiphany (Year B) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 28 January 2018

Deut. 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Cor. 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

The Man in the Cage

"Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation" (Ps. 111).

1. Imagine a hammock slung between coconut palms, the sound of waves lapping up against a rock pool, the smell of tropical flowers in the air and the islands of Lanai and Moloka'i floating above perfectly blue waters in the near distance. This was our daily life on Maui during summers when our children were little. After surfing all morning we would eat a picnic lunch, paint with watercolors and then sit on a big blanket to play the ukulele and sing.

You would recognize some of the songs like "Brown Eyed Girl" or "Freebird." But many of them were what the recording industry calls "Hawaiian Contemporary," a genre that you'd find mostly unfamiliar. One song was called Margarita. I'll sing the first two lines to give you a sense for it. "On a hilltop in Tahiti as I gaze across the bay / At the island of Moorea in the sunshine of the day."

Last week at a USF basketball game my wife called me over to introduce me to a shy and modest plumber she had just met. His name was Justin Fawsitt. As we talked we realized that Justin wrote "Margarita." In 1981 he was living in Tahiti playing music at a bar when Skippy and Israel Kamakawiwo'ole heard him and asked him to teach them the song. The version they sang on the radio became popular among Hawaiians.

What made this moment so powerful was the transformation you could see in Justin. His timidness fell away and he just shined. His sense of humor came out like the sun on a cloudy day. This happened because someone recognized who he really was. Someone saw below the surface.

Being recognized can save our life. Let me remind you that we are on a journey together. Each week in Epiphany something new becomes revealed to us about Jesus and about God. This week we see the first moment of Jesus' public ministry. We witness his tremendous power to recognize and heal the people around him.

2. Each author of the Gospels evokes a different sensibility. Often Mark's world seems full of darkness, looming threats and danger. For him, life is riddled with demons who

warp creation and constantly threaten to overcome all goodness. Mark regards human beings as porous creatures, like sponges open to spiritual influences, with low resistance to infections by dark forces.¹

We can imagine being recognized in an uncanny, sinister or unsettling way also. Last week at ACT we saw the Harold Pinter play *The Birthday Party* which someone described as a "comedy of menace." Stan, a boarder at a seaside B&B, frightens his landlady by suggesting that men might come and take her away in a wheelbarrow. That night two gangster-like figures arrive and keep insinuating that they know him. Everything in the play conspires to produce a vague sense of danger, a fear that makes freedom impossible.

This sense of a looming threat hangs over Jesus as he enters the synagogue and impresses the people with the exousia of his teaching. That word used twice by the admiring crowds means power or authority. It bears a family resemblance to ousia which is the word at the heart of the Nicene Creed and means being or substance. Sometimes you will see "ho on" written on icons. It means the being, the one who is. For me it is another way of saying that Jesus is the source of our existence.

Unlike the scribes Jesus speaks with authority. A man with an unclean spirit cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth... I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (Mk. 1). Jesus heals him. The crowds again admire his exousia. Word about him spreads.

The structure Mark uses to tell this story is called a chiasmus (after the Greek letter chi for "X").² The first verse and the last are paired and discuss geographical details. The second verse and the second to last one match in describing the astonishment people feel about Jesus' power, etc. If you do not notice this at first it might seem as if Mark unnecessarily repeats himself.

Mark uses the structure for an important reason. It focuses our attention on the two central verses describing the encounter between the man with the unclean spirit and Jesus. First the unclean spirit recognizes Jesus, and then in an even deeper passage the reader sees through Jesus that the man is more than just the spirit that convulses him.

The Greek text literally says that the man is "in" an unclean spirit, almost the way that a person might be inside a cage. In some ways the person and the spirit are identical. When the spirit speaks it seems to speak through his mouth. But in other ways they are different. The unclean spirit seems to be able to see things that the man alone cannot.³

There are two ways to misunderstand the man's situation. If we regard the man as simply another person, as wholly different from the unclean spirit, we minimize the "tragedy of his life." We would fail to see all the ways that this spirit has damaged his consciousness, "his body, his relationships," and every potential he had to experience joy or love. Even though that suffering may have felt excruciating, it has become part of that man's history and identity.

On the other hand if we see the spirit and the man as simply one thing, as we most often do, we lose his humanity. We begin to regard him as just another object. Jesus had the power to see both the man and the spirit. Jesus has the power to bring about his healing and ours.

3. In the twentieth century we exist in a ubiquitous cloud therapeutic jargon, as if everything can be reduced to a kind of psychological illness with a cure. We talk about processing things, being paranoid and getting closure. I don't know if you noticed but not one dies anymore. They just pass away. When we don't like the president we look for a psychiatrist who will tell us he is crazy.

The language of demon possession may sound strange to us at first. But it is a way of honestly talking about the universal experience of not having total control over our thoughts and compulsions. It is a way to speak vividly about the cunning of racism, hatred, anger, envy, sexism, lust and the fear of what seems foreign to us. We encounter these forces not just on the outside. An inner voice speaks this way too. This is also another way of talking about our addictions.⁴

Johann Hari wrote about this in an article called "The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered (and It Is Not What You Think)."⁵ Hari points out that there are two prevailing metaphors when it comes to addiction. On the one hand conservatives use the language of individual ethics. They blame addicts for their hedonism and for partying too much. This has led to a War on Drugs that sought to simply eradicate the chemicals that alter our consciousness in this way. It brought mass incarceration on the social level and "interventions" on the personal level which threaten to cut off support for addicts who refuse to change.

Liberals use the metaphors of addiction as a kind of disease as if our brains had been "chemically hijacked." Hari points out that one problem with this is that not all people respond the same way to chemicals or other stimulus like gambling. Hari claims that a large number of soldiers in Vietnam were addicted to heroin and that ninety-five percent simply stopped using when they returned home. When people leave the hospital most are able to stop using the painkillers they depended on before.

At the heart of Hari's claims are two studies on rats. In the first scientists put a rat in a cage with a choice of water or water with cocaine or heroin. Ninety percent of the rats keep coming back to the water with drugs until it kills them. Later a psychology professor named Bruce Alexander tried a different experiment. Instead of leaving a rat alone in a cage he built Rat Park. It had toys and tunnels to explore and plenty of other rats. In this environment he gave them the choice between the two kinds of water.

What Alexander found was that the rats with good lives "didn't like the drugged water." They consumed less than a quarter of the drugs that the isolated rats used. Furthermore none of them died. In other words the rats who were alone became heavy users and the rats in the happier environment did not.

Hari concludes that we cannot talk about addiction without looking at that person's cage, that is at her overall social condition. Perhaps he is wrong or the experiments were not properly conducted. Still it is powerful to realize that major and minor addictions may not be merely about individual morality or brain chemistry.

We are social animals. We depend on each other so profoundly that experts now recommend not only a healthy diet and exercise but that we systematically pay attention to our social needs. Between 20 and 43 percent of all American adults over the age of 60 report "frequent or intense loneliness." Recognizing the severity of the problem and its affect on health, the United Kingdom just announced the creation of a Minister for Loneliness.⁶ In our daily life we can do something about this. Before you even leave this building you could form a new connection.

Let's face it going to church is inconvenient. We could all be out getting exercise, volunteering for a noble cause or at home reading the Sunday paper. We could be at the beach but we come here in part because we realize something about the human condition – that we are made for connection with each other and with God.

What is your cage? What demons are you wrestling with as menacing messages of hate swirl around you? This morning on our journey through Epiphany Jesus welcomes us with our unclean spirits into this temple. He sees that we are more than our compulsions. He has power and authority over all that threatens us. Jesus invites us into the healing mystery of God's love. Being recognized can save our life.

¹ Matt Boulton, "With Authority: Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany 4," *SALT* 23 January 2018.

<http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-epiphany-week-4>

² Mark 1 Chiasmus:

21 ¶ They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching— with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

³ This idea and the words in quotes come from D. Mark Davis, "Separating a Man from His Cage," *Left Behind and Loving It*, 21 January 2018. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com>

⁴ Matt Boulton, "With Authority: Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany 4," *SALT* 23 January 2018. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-epiphany-week-4>

⁵ Davis linked to this article in *Left Behind*: Johann Hari, "The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered (and It Is Not What You Think)" *Huffington Post Politics*, 20 January 2015 (Updated 18 April 2017). https://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-real-cause-of-addicti_b_6506936.html

⁶ Ashley Fetters, "What Loneliness Does to the Human Body," *The Cut*, 22 January 2018. <https://www.thecut.com/2018/01/the-health-effects-of-loneliness.html>