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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y24
3 Pentecost (Proper 5B) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.
Sunday 10 June 2018

Gen. 3:8-15
Psalm 138
2 Cor. 4:13 - 5:1
Mark 3:20-35

Voices of Demons, Forgiveness of Sin

"Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3).

Friday at dawn I saw the world through security and body cameras on the Internet. Police surrounding an unarmed man by an elevator severely beating his head as his slack body slides down the wall. Police in Oregon punching the back of a mentally ill man's head as he lies on the ground and screams that he is disabled.¹

Police handcuffing a ten-year-old African American boy scaring him so much that he wets his pants.² I saw the video of Stephon Clark's death in Sacramento – all those shots in the dark as police kill this young father in his own backyard.

The Spirit opened a kind of window in my heart that allowed me to imagine what it would feel like to one minute be living my ordinary life, and then suddenly descend into the abyss, to feel the full force of this humiliation, pain and horror. The Oregon man's screamed question haunts me. "Why are you doing this?"

One of the leading causes of death among police officers is suicide. I am grateful that these days I am not in many extreme situations which would reveal my own racism, fear and brutality. Mostly my demons are just less exposed.

People don't believe in demons these days. But perhaps this is a way to avoid facing the irrational powers from beyond ourselves, powers that possess and control us.

This week handbag designer Kate Spade and television personality Anthony Bourdain succumbed to their demons and took their own lives. I worry about other struggling souls who might follow their example. We have a connected unconscious. We do not understand certain parts of ourselves. When we look inside, sometimes we see a force that threatens to destroy us, or that takes us away from who we really are.

A few days ago I talked with a friend who has recently been released from prison. He struggles with demons of hesitancy, self-doubt and fear. He doesn't know how to get started or even if he's going to find a way to survive. It is not clear yet whether or not the demons will gain the upper hand.

The idea of demons may seem archaic and weird. But using this language draws our attention to a universal aspect of the human experience that modern life tends to ignore. At times our society, and we ourselves, seem to be caught in, or possessed by, dynamics beyond our control. Sometimes we recognize these forces and can name them as: defensiveness, addiction, war, family dysfunction, sexism, anger, racism, homophobia or envy. Sometimes we feel this irrational power and have no way to articulate it.

In your challenges and the struggles of people you encounter I want to share two helpful ideas from our tradition. The first concerns our relation to God and the second is about how we might understand sin.

1. The author of Mark believes that we inhabit a dark and dangerous world. Evil can be just as much in our hearts as it is out there. He seems deeply aware that our consciousness is porous.³ He would recognize that the evil I see on the Internet has a deep kind of hold on me.

As our gospel today begins Jesus is enjoying fabulous popularity. It's like he woke up and suddenly had 20 million Twitter followers. People have come to see him from all over that world even from distant Idumea (Mk. 3:8). That's 150 miles away. The crowds are cheek a jowl, huddled so closely together that Jesus and the disciples cannot even eat bread (Mk. 3:20).⁴

There are several translation issues for me in this text. The Greek word bread appears here but doesn't make it into the English translation. Similarly the Greek text says "oi par'autou" which literally means "those with him" but appears in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible as "family." In any event, worried that he has lost his mind people with him, or his family, go to overpower him (kratos or krateo) for his own good. Words related to strength, power, ableness appear throughout this story.

The lawyers from the capitol city of Jerusalem use this occasion to charge that Jesus has not just been possessed by normal demons but by the chief demon, Beelzebul. Jesus defends himself by pointing out that healing lies at the heart of his ministry. This is the antidote to the destruction and divisiveness of the demonic. Neither a divided house nor a divided kingdom could stand. If healing were to enter Satan would literally "have his end" or come to an end. Telos the word for end the finish line of the horse-racing track. It also means goal.

Then Jesus uses an analogy that I never completely understood. He describes his mission of healing as entering a strong man's house. To rob him, one must first bind him up. What I didn't fully recognize before is that for Mark this world belongs to Satan. Jesus has bound him so that we might be free of the demons that afflict us.

For some evangelical Christians salvation refers to the dividing line between the godly and the godless, the people who are "saved" or "not saved." But I have a hard time believing that this is what Jesus means. The Latin word "salvus" is not about dividing us from them. It means healing, and that is what Jesus does. In order to heal us Jesus binds up the strong man, the demons that seek to possess us.

Then comes the really remarkable thing. I don't understand the reason for this either but the translators leave out the word "all" which occurs in the next sentence. Jesus says, "all will be forgiven of the sons of Man, their sins and the blasphemies they have blasphemed."⁵

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) asserts that Jesus can transform our lives through his concept of a loving God. Barth writes that by God's, "gifts [people] lived always sustained with forgiving loving-kindness." He goes on to say that if a person really were to grasp the truth of God's love, he or she would have, "the feeling of waking from a dream."⁶ This is what Jesus wants for us. It is how he heals us.

I wish that people really heard that line but the next almost washes it from our consciousness. This too is translated in a way that makes the truth harder to understand. It says, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit does not have forgiveness in this age but is involved in an age-long sin."

As you might gather I don't think the point of the story is to inspire fear that we might inadvertently or intentionally commit an unforgiveable sin. I do believe Jesus wants us to take seriously the voice of God that speaks in our conscience. But this brings me to my second point which is about sin.

2. Adam and Eve hear the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. Have you ever wondered why God calls to them saying, "Where are you" (Gen. 3)? Certainly God knows this. I think it is a little like when God says to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel," when God knows very well that Cain murdered him (Gen. 4).⁷

The point is for the listener, for Adam, Eve, Cain, you and me to re-orient ourselves, to find our way back after having been lost. Instead of denying what we have done or blaming someone else, it is the moment to take responsibility.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) the theologian who was tragically killed by the Nazis shortly before the liberation of Germany puts it this way. The decisive moment for Adam and Eve is not when they decide to eat the forbidden fruit, or when they take that first bite. It is when they try to hide from God and from their true identity as God's children. Where are you Adam? In the same way this morning God asks, "where are you?"

There are different metaphors for understanding sin. We hear most about sin as disobedience that requires forgiveness. But equally powerful is the picture of sin as an affliction that needs to be healed. There is also the idea of sin as separation calling for reconciliation. Bonhoeffer endorses this last picture of sin as a kind of alienation or division from God and our self.

This is one of the demons that Jesus casts out of our lives: the demon that says that the differences between us are more important than what we share in common. Jesus invites us to participate in this ministry of healing. He does this knowing that will be opposed by strangers, our work colleagues, friends and even our family. Our own fear of disapproval, our desire to not interfere may hold us back. But Jesus promises an even more extraordinary intimacy. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk. 3).

In conclusion I do not know where you are, or exactly what kind of demons you encounter in your life. Jesus' point is that we do not face these challenges alone. The strong man has been bound. In everything God will eventually prevail. We will find brothers and sisters who will help us. Jesus will not abandon us.

Let us pray: Gracious God you summon us out of the darkness of our own hearts and into the light of Jesus. Strengthen us to overcome our demons. Heal our divisions. Help us to find ourselves in you and to embrace the hope that all will be forgiven. We pray this in the name of your Son Jesus. Amen.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=Ejf572xg02M

² <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/Video-Shows-Chicago-Police-Handcuffing-10-Year-Old-Boy-484629641.html>

³ Again Liz and Matt Boulton's "Sin and Salvation," in *Salt* (10 June 2018) has hugely influenced this sermon at every point. If I keep borrowing at this rate I will have to name my next child after them. I always associate this idea of the porousness of our consciousness to Matt along with the salvus idea that comes later. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-third-week-after-pentecost>

⁴ I don't know why translators left out the word "bread" in this verse. There are other translation issues that elude me like why are those with him referred to as his family. I should have brought my Nestle Aland home to check alternative manuscripts.

⁵ I definitely have help in all these translations from D. Mark Davis, "Parables of Plunder," *Left Behind and Loving It: Living as if God's Steadfast Love Really Does Endure Forever*, 4 June 2018.

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com>

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 1, Part One* Tr. G. W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 1956) I.1.460.

⁷ I'm especially indebted to Liz and Matt for this and for what follows.