

Freedom from the demons that afflict our personality and institutions! Reading: Mark 1:29-39
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfried; St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atascadero CA 2/4/24 Epiphany/5B

Today's service began with the opening collect: "Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ..." (BCP 216)

Do you consider yourself free? Are you free from the oppressive restrictions and ideas imposed upon you by modern day culture? Do you feel free to choose a healthy lifestyle and to make independent choices that are not influenced by marketing ploys, artificial intelligence, the workplace, or familial relationships? Are you free to be happy and satisfied? Are you free to be the person you are meant to be, which is a beloved child of God; one who is living an abundant life where compassion, generosity, and sacrifice are the operating principles rather than me, myself, and I? Today I would like to talk about demons: those "negative spiritual energies" embedded in our personality and in our public institutions. These demons cause great suffering in our world and deprive us of the freedom to live the good life that God wills for us. I will use today's gospel story according to Mark as my text.

In the gospel story, we are told that Jesus "cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons." Last week's gospel story described Jesus' first public act which was an exorcism of a man with an unclean spirit. We do not know the nature of this unclean spirit, but we do know that this man was healed of his affliction through his interaction with Jesus.

Although Christians today do not attribute mental illness or epilepsy to demonic possession, we do recognize sinful desires, addictions, and pathological states of mind that play havoc with our emotions and rob us of joy. And when these negative energies dominate our actions, they harm ourselves, others, and society at large. Just take a look at the homeless encampment on Quintana Road in Morro Bay!

As part of our baptismal liturgy and renewal of vows, the promises we make address these harmful forces that reside both in people and institutions. Let's take a closer look at our baptismal vows starting with the personal (BCP 302): "Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?" What exactly are those sinful desires? Well, they include things like pride, hypocrisy, our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people. They include anger, envy, and our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts. They include our dishonesty in daily life and work, our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty. Add to this list-false judgments, prejudice, and contempt toward those who differ from us, our waste and pollution of creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us. Sometimes these sinful desires can become pathological and destructive. Our prisons and institutions are full of people who have engaged in criminal activity on account of these sinful desires gone awry. Sometimes, there are more subtle demons that cause suffering.

Steph tells the story of tending to the wounded soldiers who returned to the States from Vietnam. As a Navy nurse working on an orthopedic ward, she interacted with a young Marine Sergeant who had been in battle and had lost his entire unit. Only he survived. Although badly injured himself, his survivor's guilt began to grow into pathological proportions and eventually took control over his rational thinking. Instead of going through the long process of healing that would restore his limbs, he begged to have his legs amputated against all medical advice. Eventually, he was transferred to a rehabilitation facility where he convinced someone to amputate his legs. Ahh...the demon of pathological guilt!

Our second baptismal vow (BCP 302) addresses the 'fallen spirituality' of our public institutions, governments, and culture: "Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" These evil powers are rather easy to identify. For instance, we have a trickle-down economic system which, during the last 50 years, has turned millionaires into billionaires while turning the working class into the working poor. With insider trading, obscene CEO pay, wage theft from ordinary workers, Wall Street's continued gambling addiction, and corporate payoffs to friendly politicians, this kind of theft is threatening our democracy as the rich and powerful finance the campaigns of most political candidates. Insatiable greed and power are the primary demons actively operating within these institutions, rejecting the will of God and slowly destroying our civilization.

As an example, my mother's family experienced a kind of theft during the Great Depression of the 1930's. When her father died suddenly at an early age, the bank immediately took back the house in less than 2 weeks after his death, leaving my grandmother and her four children without a home. There was no grace period, no compassion, and little concern for vulnerable children. This "fallen" inner spirituality of our financial institutions continues today. So how did this all come to be?

Since about 6000 years ago, when the first human civilizations were born, world culture has been seeped in a Domination System: an embedded way of thinking and acting where power is hoarded, money is loved, nationalism is honored, the poor are oppressed, minorities are marginalized, and the cycle of violence is perpetrated. In this world, many are vying to be the winners, bragging about their superiority, and seeking the top positions. We call this way of walking in the world "the old humanity" or the "Domination System." Consciously or ignorantly, we are all part of this System.

While this "old humanity" appears to work for those at the top, it is life depleting for those who find themselves at the bottom. This "old humanity" is still the dominant way our political system operates-on both sides of the aisle! Instead of being courageous and willing to speak honestly about their position regarding difficult questions, political candidates frequently avoid uncomfortable topics by diverting the conversation to an unrelated topic that has been carefully constructed, previously vetted, and thoroughly rehearsed. Most of these candidates are more interested in being re-elected than striving for the good of the commonwealth. You know exactly what I mean if you have ever listened to a political debate. The Bottom Line is this: The inner spirituality of our institutions and government is "fallen" and they are being driven by unclean spirits that reject the will of God.

Finally, our third baptismal vow calls on us to "renounce Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God." (BCP 302) Satan is NOT a man in a red outfit with a pitchfork. Satan symbolizes "the presiding evil spirit of the Domination System that has a hellish hatred of the light, of truth, of kindness and compassion, and a brute lust for annihilation." (Walter Wink) Satan is a collective deeper evil-a layer of sludge beneath the murky waters. Call it what you will but be aware that it is real! A friend of mine who was a teenage during WWII in Nazi Germany, spoke of this sludge in terms of palpable fear. It was not one person or one institution who was responsible for this climate of fear, but rather a collection of darkness that covered the country and wreaked havoc on its citizens. Destruction of the planet due to climate change, denial of the Holocaust, children kidnapped for prostitution rings, and pornographic snuff movies where actual murders are filmed, are all part of this sludge.

What are we to do? We shouldn't be at each other's throats, witnessing one horrific global act after another that scars our heart and makes us numb. In the face of this kind of adversity, when the whirlwind of despair threatens to engulf us, it is important to name and exorcise those insidious forces of destruction that distort one's relationship with God, people, and creation.

So we begin with ourselves. In ten days, we will celebrate Ash Wednesday, a time for reflection, repentance, and ashes. The Litany of Penitence (p.267/BCP) is the most important part of this liturgy. Take a serious look at this litany before Ash Wednesday and see if you can name the demons in your own life that separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And then ask God for the grace to purify and strengthen your character so that you can be a more effective healing presence in this world.

When it comes to dealing with our public institutions which include businesses, governments, and even religious establishments, we need to recognize their "inner spirituality" and consciously name the demons that corrupt them. We can refuse to participate in their corruption. We can also use our political power, money, and religious convictions to influence their direction. Standing up and speaking the truth might be risky, but if we want change, we must be part of the solution rather than accepting what is.

Finally, "we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." (Einstein) "We cannot redeem ourselves from a system whose malignancy we scarcely recognize and whose [prizes] we have come to crave... We need revelation to see our sorry state as well as liberation to be freed from it." (Walter Wink) In seeking this freedom, we Christians have promised to turn our lives over to a higher power and to follow Jesus as our Savior. And so we come here Sunday after Sunday, to worship God, to ask for forgiveness, to repent of our ways, and to ask for grace as we pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Litany of Penitence (Ash Wednesday Service, BCP 267)

The Celebrant and People together, all kneeling

Most holy and merciful Father:
We confess to you and to one another,
and to the whole communion of saints
in heaven and on earth,
that we have sinned by our own fault
in thought, word, and deed;
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

The Celebrant continues

We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others, as we have been forgiven.
Have mercy on us, Lord.

We have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us. We have not been true to the mind of Christ. We have grieved your Holy Spirit.
Have mercy on us, Lord.

We confess to you, Lord, all our past unfaithfulness: the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives,
We confess to you, Lord.

Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people,
We confess to you, Lord.

Our anger at our own frustration, and our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves,
We confess to you, Lord.

Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, and our dishonesty in daily life and work,
We confess to you, Lord.

Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to commend the faith that is in us,
We confess to you, Lord.

Accept our repentance, Lord, for the wrongs we have done: for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty,
Accept our repentance, Lord.

For all false judgments, for uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and for our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us,
Accept our repentance, Lord.

For our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us,
Accept our repentance, Lord.

Restore us, good Lord, and let your anger depart from us;
Favorably hear us, for your mercy is great.

Accomplish in us the work of your salvation,
That we may show forth your glory in the world.

By the cross and passion of your Son our Lord,
Bring us with all your saints to the joy of his resurrection.

The Bishop, if present, or the Priest, stands and, facing the people, says

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desires not the death of sinners, but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live, has given power and commandment to his ministers to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins. He pardons and absolves all those who truly repent, and with sincere hearts believe his holy Gospel.

Therefore we beseech him to grant us true repentance and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him which we do on this day, and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy, so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*