

**Engaging the Powers**  
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

*Based on Mark 1:21-28. Jesus Commands the Unclean Spirits*

In the world of Reiki, which is a system of energy healing originating in Japan, there is such a thing as a “healing crisis.”

A healing crisis, in the world of Reiki, occurs when the flow of healing energy begins to release long term toxic buildup that has made its way into our cellular memory. This momentary release of long term toxic buildup may in fact magnify symptoms of disease for the short term, even as a deeper more lasting healing is taking place.

In other words, it may feel like things are getting worse, even when they are actually getting better.

The healing crisis that Reiki describes in individual terms is described as communal in the world of counseling. According to family systems theory, emotional or spiritual “dis-ease” in a community often lands on one or a few “identified patients” whom the rest of the community agrees are “the problem” to be resolved. But when those “identified patients” move into greater health, when they stop taking on the disease of the community for themselves, the rest of the system goes topsy turvy. They are now forced to heal *themselves* from the problem they *thought* belonged to someone else!

We see this, for example, in families that struggle with alcoholism or addiction or some other form of ‘acting out. A compulsion to drink that cannot be cured but can only be cast out, the ‘unclean spirit’ gets blamed for all the problems in the family. And everyone else lets themselves off the hook for the ways their own problems are contributing to the family sickness.

But then, of course, when the alcoholic gets sober, the problems are still there. And the whole family has to deal with them. The healing of the “identified patient” forces the system to deal with its own problems.

Something similar, I would argue, is happening with Jesus and the scribes and the gathered community in our lesson from Mark’s Gospel today.

They are gathering on the Sabbath, like we are. Saturday for them; Sunday for us. Gathering around the teachings of the community and the songs and the prayers, led by the scribal elite. In Capernaum, on that northernmost edge of the Sea of Galilee, with a name that means “Village of Comfort.” They are comforted in their gathering to remember the reign of God for the people of God, as are we.

Without warning, this carpenter from the sticks usurps the scribes of the synagogue on their most holy day. Talk about *dis*-comfort! It would be as if my unemployed neighbor living with his Dad in their trailer up the hill came sledding down our shared driveway just this second, crashing through the window of my home office, and started preaching right now to you. And to me.

And it would be as if you liked his preaching *better* than mine!

It would be as if you liked his preaching better than mine because he spoke “with authority” about the coming reign of God. As if he *knew* that reign in his bones, in his body, in his soul. As he knew that reign of God will,

in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr, “take back the world from those ‘who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.’” And he was ready to do exactly that: take back the world, right here and now, beginning with us! Beginning with *me!*

Can you imagine?

Someone with no fancy seminary degree, who cannot read the Scriptures in Greek *or* Hebrew, crashing our party to preach to you about the coming reign of God, while yours truly is cast aside.

I would freak out.

You would freak out.

My husband, the former linebacker turned Olympic weight lifter would erupt in defense of his beloved!

And we would be wrong.

Because the Spirit of God, in the form of my unemployed neighbor living with his Dad in their trailer up the hill would in fact be trying to heal us, from his lived experience of the coming reign of God. And we would have completely missed it. Just like the scribes in the synagogue in Capernaum we meet in Mark’s Gospel this morning.

The truth is, the Jesus we meet in the Gospel of Mark – and all of the gospels, really, but *particularly* in the Gospel of Mark – is leading a non-violent, Spirit-led Direct Action Campaign toward the religious and political elite – like me! – in order to bring about an entirely new social order. The Jesus we meet in the Gospel of Mark is “re-ordering power,” in the words of biblical scholar Herman Waetjen, because his “religion no longer orders political, economic, and social power equitably.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is “re-ordering power” because the powers that be – the religious and political powers that be – no longer “order correctly” economic and political and social power equitably.

That is what they were designed to do! The church, the synagogue, the temple in the Scriptures, the institutions that are supposed to be “ordering out of chaos” our way of life, those institutions are no longer ordering political and economic and social power equitably. And so here comes Jesus in his non-violent, Spirit-led Direct Action Campaign calling it out.

Oh, boy!

You and I might call what Jesus is doing in Mark’s Gospel something like “seeking systemic change” within “systems and structures” that keep people poor, oppressed, without food or shelter, unemployed, addicted, politically and spiritually powerless.

The words the Bible uses are “engaging the powers and principalities” in the world, those “unclean spirits” sort of like addictions that have seeped into our institutions. Institutions that were supposed to be *good*, that were supposed to be about taking care of the people and the planet. Something has shifted, and so those institutions and structures have “betrayed their divine vocation,” in the words of biblical scholar Walter Wink.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Waetjen, Herman. *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark’s Gospel*. Augsburg Fortress, 1989, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Wink, Walter. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Augsburg Fortress, 1992, pg. 9.

And so here comes Jesus, who has just come through this dramatic experience of baptism by John in the Jordan near Jerusalem. Unlike everyone else who has just experienced “someone else” doing this ritual for them, Jesus dives into the depths of the water, going through a near-death experience, in order to become completely aligned with the coming reign of God. With the positive power that created us *good*.

And he goes back to Galilee, and he goes back to Capernaum – that Village of not-so-much-comfort-after-all – and he calls the powers that be of his time to greater wholeness. To live what they say they believe about the coming reign of God.

That is what he is teaching them, this carpenter from the sticks. The reign of God is at hand. Don’t you want to be part of it? Don’t you want to be healed? Don’t you want to participate? Doesn’t your institution want to reclaim its divine vocation?

Of course we want to say yes! You and I, of course we want to say yes, let’s get well, but here’s the problem: when you seek that kind of healing, when you seek systemic change, when you seek that kind of wellness within a system that has labeled the poor and the leper and the prostitute – the unemployed man living with his father up the hill – that is the person with the problem, that is the “identified patient” in our human family system – seeking wellness in that kind of system inevitably causes a healing crisis.

As soon as the experience of the completely aligned reign of God comes among us, the healing crisis begins, and all of that toxic buildup that has been with us for so long is released. In the first century, they call that release of toxic buildup an “unclean spirit.” And all of that unclean spirit – all of that toxic buildup – looks at Jesus, who is so completely aligned with the reign of God that he is in fact living that reign in his very body, and says *you* are the problem! The toxic buildup, in the form of an unclean spirit, in the utter “dis-ease” of the community – the ways in which you and I have sabotaged the power of God in this world through the power of our institutions and their job to care for the people – says the *healthy one* is the problem!

We say your desire to heal us is actually destroying us. That is what the unclean spirit in this story says to Jesus: you “Holy One” have come to destroy us. And that is what it feels like when we really listen and hear what it is that movements like Black Lives Matter and the Poor People’s Campaign and all of the climate justice movements are really saying to us. When the invitation to wellness for our institutions to live into their divine vocation to care for the people and the planet comes, we are right to be afraid. Because it means we have to release all that is within us that has been unwell. All that toxic building that has come through the generations.

Whew!

That is where we are, friends. In the Presbyterian Church. In the nation. In the entire planet.

We have a limited opportunity to return to the alignment with God and with one another that was – and still is – created good. That truly does have a divine vocation of stewardship, of tending, of nurturing, of caring.

And the invitations to be well are also bringing out the worst in us.

I wish I could say that all of the ugliness and all of the hatred and all of the violence that is boiling up is the fault of some “identified patient” in our human family system. That someone *else* is the problem.

What Jesus is doing in the synagogue this morning – in the gathered community of you and me – is saying: be muzzled, unclean spirit. Because you do not belong to just this one person. The whole community has to

wrestle with the fact that the whole community is not well. And you have not been well for a very long time. Centuries, really. Even millennia.

But I want you to be well.

I do not want to destroy your goodness, Jesus is saying to the scribal class. I want to call you back to the best of who you were meant to be.

The story ends with word of Jesus spreading all throughout Galilee. The unclean spirit is released. There is an exorcism among us! There is an invitation to greater health that is embodied in the whole community

And that is, in some ways, where we are left, as well.

Word can spread that the healing, justice-seeking, liberating, peace-that-passes-understanding movement of the reign of God is among us. That even the ugliness, the toxic buildup of this healing crisis we have been experiencing, can be named, engaged, muzzled, and released.

Which leaves us with a choice to commit to this ongoing process of healing – of reclaiming our divine vocation – toward the coming reign of God. That is our ongoing invitation: to release everything within us – individually, communally, globally – that is toxic. So that the world may truly be well.

I know you will join me. And I know you will join our friend up the hill.

Whose name is David.

Which, of course, means, “Beloved.”

Amen.