

“Being Possessed”

Sermon given on the 4th Sunday after Epiphany, January 29th, 2012, by The Rev. Joe Summers (Readings: Deut. 18:15-20, Psalm 111, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28)

Jesus calls us to live in Jubilee Time, the time when debts financial and moral are forgiven, the time when wealth and resources are shared, the time when we take time for Sabbath rest and enjoyment, the time when slaves and captives are freed.

You see Jesus practice Jubilee time--all the time. Jesus goes about living out the Jubilee: in creating great feasts, where people are renewed in spirit and body, as people share what they have, and all are fed, in going around forgiving people, whatever they or their society felt they morally owed, in challenging every kind of structural oppression and domination, and in casting out demons that possessed people.

It's this last action of casting out demons where we get some real disconnect. For the terms possession and demons call to mind all those movies where people are being controlled by little green devils or have heads that spin around. The idea of possession has been used to demonize those with mental illness and made them feel bad by portraying them as unclean. Often it has made problems so much worse by making them into something totally irrational and beyond our understanding.

I want to suggest today that, if we can let go of the lenses of pulp fiction and the religiously irresponsible, then I think this idea of being possessed, our very essence held captive or controlled by internal forces, and the ideas of freeing people from that domination--- can be incredibly helpful.

First, let us be clear what are we talking about when we talk about people being possessed. We're talking very simply about people being controlled, treated liked objects, by forces within them--no more--no less. Why is this so important? Because while external forces may hold people in bondage, internal forces may enslave us just as much. Needs, feelings, stories, ideas, past experiences, can control us just as much as any master's whip and chains. Most of us struggle with these forces--daily. If we can't see when and how forces within us are trying to control us, we are surely going to be their pawns.

Sometimes this can be pretty dramatic. I remember years ago seeing Omar Kadafi in a TV interview. He talked as if he was totally at peace, and yet his words were all about killing others. That total disconnect is a sign of possession. When you are radically out of touch with your feelings, they can totally possess you.

We now know Newt Gingrich was possessed by a spirit of righteousness, not righteousness but a spirit of righteousness, when he was righteously denouncing Bill Clinton for having an affair with Monica Lewinsky, while at the very same time, he was having an affair with Callista.

Paul tells the Corinthians that their church leaders, who claim esoteric knowledge, are really possessed by a spirit of knowledge and that, paradoxically, the only way they can find their way back to wisdom and love is by embracing the foolishness of the cross.

Ann Arbor is the kind of community where you often find a kind of forced tolerance for religion “for those who need it.” We don’t like the idea of not being in control of our lives. We don’t like the idea that we may need help from others. But this stuff of of being controlled, of being possessed, by forces within us, is not just over there or far away or long ago; it’s something we all struggle with; it’s something I run into all the time in my work with people in this community.

There was a time when I was one of the walking dead. I could look back on who I was when I felt alive. I could remember it, but I couldn’t feel it. It was like I was living beside myself. I was a captive to some great dread that was like an invisible wall that cut me off from the human being I once was. Sometimes I could get a brief glimpse of life, very briefly experience it, for a few seconds, as I was waking up in the morning; but that was it. The rest of the time I felt totally cut off. Ultimately, it was only through intensive therapy that I was able to journey down into the hell within me, let myself face and feel the experience of abandonment that I was so afraid of, that I was able to live my life again not so controlled by that fear. By the way, my understanding is that the term psycho-analysis is based in part on the myth of Psyche, who had to journey down into the underworld in order for springtime to return to the earth. That’s a powerful story about how one can be held captive by forces within us, and what it may take to get free.

My experience has left me aware of how all of us struggle with forces within us, that would make us their pawns. There is the young brother who can never work hard, because it triggers some great anger in him-- an anger he feels he can only control through drugs and alcohol. There is the sister who lives under the reign of some mysterious great sadness. There is the brother who is possessed by a sense of victimization and righteousness, that doesn’t allow him to see others or how he is treating them. There is a sister, who was so taught to be ashamed of herself, that she shames others without ever realizing it. There is the brother who hears voices that tell him disaster is going to befall others, and it will be his fault for not preventing it. There is the sister who is driven crazy by voices, that tell her she must make up for all that she has done or failed to do. There is the brother who has been convinced that, somehow, someday, the universe is out to get him. There is the sister whose super ego wants to kill her anytime she’s not following its dictates. There’s the brother whose unreasonable expectations of others leaves him continually feeling angry and resentful. These are the kinds of realities that, as you come to know people well, you discover most of us have to struggle with to greater or lesser degrees, every day.

Yet most of us, most of the time, tend to think that how we are all feeling is caused by things outside of us. Things outside of us do have a profound effect on us, but often, whether we are happy or sad, hopeful or in despair, energetic or lethargic, the effect is being determined by

things within us. And these forces within us can leave us freezing on the hottest day, sweating on a freezing day, isolated and alone, when we are surrounded by people who love us, thinking others are out to get us when, in fact, they are reaching out to us, ready to harm ourselves for making the least little mistakes, or for having done things that have had almost no real impact on others, controlled by a shame or fear that would keep us avoiding and touching the depths of our soul's and our experience. So, first of all, when our gospels talk about demons, they are simply using a different language to talk about realities that we all know, that we all struggle with.

Additionally, naming things as demons in the ancient world was often a way for people to claim power over these forces, if they believed God had power over such forces. It was a way of exercising dominion over these forces, not turning them into some bugaboo. Demonology was a part of the science of the time, which enabled people to clearly name the forces that were controlling them or controlling others. Many of us know this same phenomenon through good therapy where, through conversation and reflection, we discover that the "it" that has been controlling us is an aspect of ourselves, and that in that discovery, "it" loses its control over us.

The metaphor of demons has probably gotten so reified, that it may not be useful for most of us these days, but I do hope we can find ways to collectively and individually confront and talk about the forces within us, that are trying to control or enslave us.

Here I just want to add two quick notes: the first is that this should be critical about those internal voices that tell us that, when we experience something as unclean, it is a message from God. In retrospect it is so evident how our very instincts have been programmed by cultural super egos that lead us, wanting to avoid everything and everyone the social hierarchy fears: dirt, those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, those who don't fit neatly into its categories, ourselves --when we or our actions don't fit into traditional expectations. Secondly, I just want to note that, having recently talked about being called, I'm aware that sometimes, from the outside, God moving in us can look like we're being controlled by forces within us. But there's a vital difference. The Divine is always calling us into being and subjecthood, not treating us like objects. The presence of the Divine always enlivens us, not deadens us.

Lastly, in our gospel today, we hear that, part of why people were so moved by Jesus, was that he spoke with authority. True authority is about knowledge rooted in experience. Though our society teaches us to be ashamed of any ways we're not in total control of ourselves, the 12-Step movement has taught us the power and the wisdom of recognizing where and what is exercising power over us.

Often it is only in and through living community, that we discover the authority of the Spirit to exercise dominion over such forces. Collective prayer is partly about owning what we're needing to turn over to a higher power, and it works.

To be a real Jubilee people, a people who really understand what and how people are being controlled by forces within them (stories, experiences, feelings), means that we must each be

willing to admit the ways we're needing to be saved from such forces within us, so that, together, we can work out our salvation with one another, so that we can help each other find our way towards that freedom that's at the heart of the Jubilee vision, so that we can know life, not controlled by the past or under the dominion of the dead, so that we can know life, not subject to any forces or scripts that would enslave or harm our present or futures, so that we can emerge into the fullness of our humanity, into fullness of heart, into fullness of spirit, into fullness of life.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.