

Title: Silence and Silencing: The Demons of our time

Text: Mark 1: 21-28

Rev Sharon Smith

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:21-28

1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

1:22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

1:23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

1:24 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."

1:25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

1:26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

1:27 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."

1:28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Introduction:

"Carl McColman takes the microphone and he asks scholar: Dr Lerita Coleman Brown – is there a particular moment of encountering silence that you would like to share with us?"

"Well" she replies "there is silence in the morning and silence in the evening as intentional spiritual practicing".

And she continues: "I have added in a 5-minute period of silence before each hour, to pause and reflect what has the last hour been like and what would I like the next hour to be like?"

Speaking as an African American Women she says: "When you define yourself from the inside, no one can define you from the outside"

<https://podcasts.bcast.fm/e/q80517mn>

When the Heart Speaks – by Lerita Coleman Brown

There is the silence we choose, and there is another kind of silence – the kind that happens to you. The “Silencing” of institutional power, the “silencing” of interpersonal power.

In this gospel story Jesus confronts silencing and offers inner silence.

**"What have you to do with us, Jesus?", the Demons ask.
And Jesus' responds: "Be still".**

A man finds himself in a room.
It's a synagogue.
But really it could be any community.

This man has an Unclean spirit.
We are not told, if this man is aware of his state.
But everyone else is.
He has an Unclean spirit
And they were clean.

For:

- they had been ceremonially washed,
- they ate this food and not that meat,
- none of them carried a virus or bacteria that they could pass on,
- and each one could probably trace their heritage back to England, I mean... Abraham.

This room is filled with Squeaky Clean people, or so they seem.
And the man in their midst has an **Unclean Spirit or a Demon**

Now the Greek word for Unclean spirit seems to be used interchangeably by Mark with the word for Demon or evil spirit.

A first century view of the world put everything horrific, harmful, and shameful in a box called evil.

It was a living evil.

Evil personified by spirits.

Spirits entering and leaving humans was a common way of describing frightening or shameful experiences.

Remember... the distraught father who approached Jesus because his son couldn't speak.

He described the experience of watching his son have seizures, drop to the ground, clench his jaw unable to swallow his own saliva.

Imagine being this Dad – feeling so out of control, helpless, insecure, stuck, frightened. And he simply said: “Teacher, I have a son, he has a spirit”

Humanity has a long history of distancing people who have had experiences that seem too frightening for us to face.

- Leper colonies
- Mental asylums
- Prisons
- The projects
- Sometimes we place them in an untouchable category in our minds.

All around us and within us are divisions that war against each other.

Ched Myers, New Testament scholar and author of *Binding the Strong Man* writes about this story in Mark. He comments that...

In this first of Jesus’ public actions in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus moves to the heart of the provincial religious social order – the synagogue (sacred space) on a Sabbath (sacred time). The audience distinguish his teaching with authority from that of the religious scribes. And a conflict is framed.

Now, we friends, are cultural outsiders to this story – and it is easy for us to dismiss the story based on modern medical anthropology – seeing Jesus cure epilepsy or mental illness instead. And yes that is one approach but it leads to many, many other issues.

Like: are these experiences evil? Is Jesus’ primary message and life about performing magical cures?

And according to Myers, if we take this view, we miss the meaning of powerful acts where Jesus confronts social power.

Systems of power that rob some human beings from fully flourishing.

- Who are the majority who receive education, employment, bank loans, housing?
- And who are the ones who are overlooked?

And Interactions of power

- Sexism – the way women speak of men, the way men gaze at women, the dismissing of a person exploring other gender options
- Ageism – favouring a younger person for their energy over an elder; or the dismissal of the young adult because of their ‘not yet’ experience – “too young to know”.

And there is a third dimension to social power:

It is the internalizing of the labels, the shaming, the guilt, the silencing that others do to us. Academics call this self-stigmatization.

I have experienced it as: **Internal powerlessness.**

Or as poets and song writers often refer to it as “The demons within”
Voices that divide our very selves.

And it is these voices that we are most aware of, when we seek Silence.
That is, the silence that we choose.

In the third and fourth centuries when Christianity became tolerated and eventually the religion of the empire, people fled to the desert in resistance to a powerful Christianity.

The desert became a spiritual landscape for doing battle with inner demons.

In the writings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers we are offered wisdom as we face our own inner despair and the distraction from Presence and the present.

- **Stay with what’s happening**, don’t run away physically or emotionally from yourself
We take ourselves with us, wherever we go. Sometimes we need to leave situations if they are harmful. Yet most often we are running from our won patterns of responding and relating. Stay.
- **Get to know yourself**, the inner landscape of your thoughts, your reactions, your emotions, your lived felt sense in your body. The desert elders called this “Kardio-gnosis” – the knowledge of one’s heart.
- **Practice watchfulness** or “Nepsis”: Find ways to observe your thoughts – meditation practices, Centering prayer, intentional action. And to observe the rise and fall of your emotions and reactions – Welcoming practices, breath work.
- **Don’t do this alone.** These desert dwellers had each other as guides.

Christine Valters Painter, Desert Fathers and Mothers

We are entering into Black History Month – where we celebrate the contributions and perseverance of Black Canadians.

Let me end with these profound words of African American activist, contemplative and scholar Dr. Howard Thurman, from his book Meditations from the Heart:

I seek the strength to overcome evil.

I seek the strength to overcome the tendency to evil in my own heart.

I recognize the tendency to do the unkind thing when the mood of retaliation or revenge rides high in my spirit;

I recognize the tendency to make of others a means to my own ends;

I recognize the tendency to yield to fear and cowardice when fearlessness and courage seem to fit easily into the pattern of my security.

I seek the strength to overcome the tendency to evil in my own heart.

I seek the strength to overcome the evil that is present all about me.

I recognize the evil in much of the organized life about me;

I recognize the evil in the will to power as found in groups, institutions and individuals;

I recognize the terrible havoc of hate and bitterness which makes for fear and panic in the common life.

I seek the strength to overcome the evil that is present all about me.

I seek the strength to overcome evil; I must not be overcome by evil.

I seek the purification of my own heart, the purging of my own motives;

I seek the strength to withstand the logic of bitterness, the terrible divisiveness of hate, the demonic triumph of the conquest of others;

What I seek for myself I desire with all my heart for friend and foe alike.

I seek the strength to overcome evil.

Amen.