

INSIDE/OUT (GOSPEL OF LUKE) – Luke Knight

Power and Weakness | Luke 11:14-28 | February 27, 2022

I was hiking recently with a friend and we got talking about our waistlines, which turned into talking about the *forty-day* season ahead of Easter, known in some Christian traditions as Lent, beginning this Wednesday. For many, those forty-days before Easter is about taking time and taking stock of what's going on inside, a bit like turning an old backpack inside out and having a really good sort through. The *forty days* of Lent echo Jesus' *forty days* in the desert where he fasted and prayed and emerged with a unique kind of victory through reliance and obedience. And Jesus' forty days echoed the *forty years* the ancient Israelite people spent in the desert where they *struggled* with reliance and obedience on God. One of the things we see between Jesus forty days in the desert and the ancient Israelites forty years, is that where Israel failed to be consistently reliant and obedient, Jesus was.

Today, Lent still carries themes of reliance and obedience. You could say that it's an intentionally *deserted* time. A time to listen, reflect and even fast, asking God to turn our hearts inside out. Anyway, my friend and I both admitted that fasting had at times become more about the dietary benefits than giving attention to prayer and scripture. My friend typically fasts beer, but wasn't sure if his focus on God had grown so much as he had simply stopped drinking beer for forty days. Similarly, I'd given up sweets and agreed that though that took discipline, I didn't always see that attention turned over to God, and so it tended to fill up with other things. As we climbed the mountain our discussion turned from where we were going, to who we were becoming, and how that forty-day road to Easter would contribute this year to our growth as Christians. And as a bonus our waistlines shrank a little on the hike, at least until we stopped for fast food on the way home.

In the passage we heard earlier we also find Jesus *going somewhere*. This time he's not going into the desert, but is on his way to Jerusalem and ultimately to his death. We might notice that here in Luke 11 and 12 Jesus isn't playing around, as we find some of his most confrontational words in this stretch of Luke's gospel. Not unlike old backpacks filled with all kinds of stuff, *Jesus is turning hearts inside out*. And he does so because he cares about where people are going, who they are becoming. His journey isn't only up to Jerusalem, but inward to the very heart of our need for renewal.

Who is Jesus? (Luke 11:14-23)

In this episode Jesus has just healed someone possessed by an evil spirit and a debate begins around him. Some say Jesus is himself possessed, working a kind of magic to push other demons around. Others want more proof that Jesus is on God's side (we might relate to wanting more evidence or assurance before we throw our lot in with Jesus entirely). But at the core of these debates is the main question of all four gospels: *who is Jesus?* As in this story, over again in the gospels Jesus is described not as magician, not just a prophet, not just a swell guy, but *somehow* God living next door. That question is also handed to us in this time before Easter. Who is Jesus, and what sway does he have in our twenty-first century lives? Can we trust him enough to sink our hope in him? Well the gospels present us with this question over again and just like those in this story we can choose to discredit him, mistrust him, or something else entirely, daring to take a risk on him.

As usual in the gospels the accusations levied at Jesus don't stand up. When some say he's possessed by an evil spirit, he responds with vivid imagery. His response is that any country in the throes of civil war is not in a position of strength but weakness. We're hearing this week about power struggles and invasion, and those kinds of geo-political issues were just as present in the ancient world as they are today. Jesus uses that kind of language to describe God's maneuvers against the dark powers standing behind *all* evil. For Jesus, this was no civil war, but more like an invasion which had established a devastating beachhead in territory occupied by evil. The first domino had been pushed and now the rest were falling one by one. Because Jesus was leaving a trail of light in his wake it made little sense that he was on the side of darkness. So all the healing and life flashing out from Jesus was sign that God had arrived on the scene, had already won a decisive battle, and the victory was spilling out wherever Jesus went. That's also what Jesus is getting at with the image of breaking and entering, of overpowering the strong man no matter the fortification. Jesus had already won a kind of victory over evil power, and so Satan's lackeys didn't have a chance when Jesus turns up from place to place.

So this whole interaction seems to be about power and authority. First, Jesus' power is obvious by his casting out of a demon (something we're told he did all the time as well as constant healings), but he also *speaks* with real authority, and no one has much of a response in this episode. We see this often in the gospels, Jesus acting and speaking with a weight that no one else around can pretend to have. An example of this comes next because we then hear some of Jesus' heaviest words, "*Anyone who isn't with me opposes me, and anyone who isn't working with me is actually working against me.*" Other translations say something like "whoever doesn't gather with me scatters", which might better help us understand Jesus' meaning. If Jesus can muscle out evil powers, sickness, darkness, he must light - because darkness is only evicted by light. And if the evil powers are scattering, it's because the light has come into the world, not another shade of darkness. There's also a sense here that Jesus is so bright that *everything else* seems as darkness. The gospels constantly emphasize the massive difference between Jesus and everyone else, a truly strange figure. So though Jesus is the man next door, at the same time the gap between Jesus and the rest is incredible, like the gap between humanity and God to begin with. Which brings us back to that key question: *who is this Jesus?*

One question we might be asking is how does this powerful, "all or nothing" Jesus square with his depiction as a kind, utterly inclusive teacher? Well, it does, and it doesn't. Of course, it's unavoidable in the gospels that Jesus is a dramatically inclusive figure, as he really does welcome anyone. But it's also clear that he welcomes and deals with everyone on his terms. Here's someone who's open to anyone (very often people we're not open to) and yet that welcome is not a kind of cold or ambivalent tolerance. Jesus has such gravity, such a roominess about him, that he's able and willing to take people in (so to speak) in a way other don't have the capacity to. So Jesus doesn't deal so much in tolerance as he does in an *unlimited capacity for the reception and renewal* of every person he comes across. The saying goes that *Jesus loves people so much to take them as they are, but too much to leave them as they are.*

That vision of Jesus is something we still struggle with today; his capacity for both outrageous inclusivity and exacting exclusivity. We struggle probably because Jesus has been relegated to the self-help section of the bookstore. We want acceptance, but not the being receiving us. We want love but not the source of love. We want all the goodness which leaps from the depths of God's character, but tend to ignore that we ourselves have our very beginnings and endings in God's life itself. It's a confusion that leaves

us frustrated and overwhelmed, because we tend today to suspect and mistrust authority (which we all have grounds for, everyone has a story). But part of getting to know Jesus is coming to that unavoidable impasse where we have to ask what authority, if any, lies beyond human authority, our authority? If God's real, how much capacity does God have; how much leeway does God get? At times we discover we haven't made much room for God collectively or personally. One of the things we're discovering in the pandemic that we get very anxious when human power structures fail us, and that anxiety might be telling, driving us to unnecessary division. Who's capacity are we trusting when the going gets tough? These are difficult questions, but if we don't ask them we'll only dabble in a kind of consumer Christianity, roaming the supermarkets of religion, *curating* our relationship to the being at the center of the universe. When we put it like that, putting God in the self-help section seems pretty silly, yet we've probably all done it. And in a way, that's what Jesus is getting at – and why things begin to heat up through Luke 11 and 12. For Jesus, *it's dangerous for human hearts to dabble in self-reliance, trusting ourselves as ultimate authorities.*

Spring Cleaning (Luke 11:24-28)

All this then comes to a bit of a head with Jesus' next strange picture. If an evil spirit is evicted from a "house", leaving it empty, it will come back with more spirits and fill the house again. It's hard to understand Jesus' meaning here but he probably isn't talking about the "possession" of individual people. It's more likely he's speaking to the history of the Israelite people of his time. They had been trying to sweep the house, to clean up, but for all the efforts of spring cleaning they lacked God's occupancy in the center of their community. Enter Jesus, God come to his people, *the presence and light ready to fill it all up*, and yet Jesus is rejected at every turn. So Jesus' meaning here might be that it doesn't matter how much spring cleaning happens, if they're not willing to welcome the owner of the house, the light of the world, darkness will always creep back in, because the only thing that evicts darkness is light. So going a step further: For Jesus, *it's dangerous for human hearts to dabble in self-reliance because it leads to self-destruction. (we'll hear more about that later in Luke 11 and 12)*

So part of what we're hearing in the Luke's gospel is that there is something about Jesus which is *essential* in a way that nothing and no one else is essential. There's been a lot of debate about what's essential these past two years, and we're learning that things aren't as simple as we once thought. What's essential to one is not to another and so on. So we're asking what we need in order to be healthy persons and communities; what factors determine what is essential and non-essential? Well we've all been in those heated discussions haven't we? And even though that's been hard, it's not been all bad. Communities asking, "what's essential to be healthy persons and groups?" is a good question to ask, so long as we discuss respectfully, and graciously as Jesus' people, ensuring the *needs* go ahead of our *wants*. And as Christians we should be cautious about demand making when it comes to having our wants met.

The question of *what is essential* is what Jesus is getting at here. Not should the gyms be open, or should we be able to have a party - not those kind of essentials - but the question of what or who is *absolutely essential* to the life and death of a human being. Which brings back this question again of "*who is Jesus*" in the gospels. In Luke 11 and 12 Jesus shares warnings through various pictures for the people of his time to stop going the way they were going, of self-reliance, toward self-destruction. But you only warn someone of a terrible trajectory if you care about them; you only risk offence if the risk of their direction is greater. Jesus' warnings echo not only to us personally today, but to our world in the throes of darkness and chaos. How long will we turn from one shade of darkness to another, hoping it will shed more light on the path? How long will we anxiously clutter our lives *making* little to no room for the one who's *made* us – the truly *essential being* in the center of all creation?

At this point in the episode Jesus' critics again fall silent because of the authority of his presence, but then a woman shouts out how blessed Jesus' mother must be to have produced such an impressive son – maybe a kind of standing ovation. But Jesus stays laser focused, "*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*" As one writer puts it, what Jesus is looking for, what God is looking for, is not applause, but trust which leads to reliance and obedience. Jesus doesn't need a standing ovation, if he is who he says he is, he designed the hands clapping; what he cares about here, what he cares about now, is that we quit

dabbling in various shades of darkness, pretending we can manage to make things a little brighter on our own.

It's moments like this in the gospels which remind us that Jesus seems less interested in our amazement or applause or appraisal of him, and more interested in whether or not we'll give him *full occupancy*. And in that sense he can feel like a an almost dangerously welcoming figure. He doesn't just take *on* disciples, he takes *us in* to his own unending being. He doesn't want just a corner of my heart, he wants the whole thing. Back to that earlier image of a backpack. Once we've turned the backpack inside out, what's going to fill it again? Bad habits can be replaced with good habits, but habits won't heal us. Habits didn't imagine the stars or be there with us when we die. Christian growth is not so much about *hard work*, as it is about *heart work*; letting Jesus turn our hearts inside out. And we needn't worry about what tumbles out even if it frightens us (remember "*Jesus knew their thoughts*", nothing surprises him or grosses him out enough to stop loving us). We needn't worry because it's the one we give occupancy to who makes the difference, who fills us with incomparable light.

I'm slowly becoming convinced that God needs less of my anxious effort to help me grow than I thought. Of course, we have a part in it, there's room for rhythms and structure, like using this time before Easter. But more than that, God might just need me to sit down and say "welcome". So as we enter this time before Easter we're inviting one another to hand our hearts over to Jesus to be turned inside out, empty them of clutter, but more importantly, to fill them with his presence and light. Here's three ways of doing that:

- *First, read the story of Jesus in gospels.* Pick a gospel and read it from now until Easter, just get around Jesus and see what happens.
- *Second, enter the silence in order to listen.* Clutter and noise can have a deadly spread, so let's get quiet, which helps us to listen. Less words, more welcome.
- *Third, ask to be filled with Jesus' Spirit,* the Holy Spirit. Not to fill ourselves with clever ideas, or work up some kind of self-esteem, but ask to be filled God's very own unending being, as Dave often says, to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What stood out to you about this section of Luke?
2. What role does Jesus' authority play in your life?
3. What ways do you find Jesus uses to transform you personally? How does he tend to call you to "hear and obey"?