

Mark 1:21-28
January 29, 2006

(Mark 1:21-28 NRSV) They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. {22} They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. {23} Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, {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." {25} But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" {26} And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. {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." {28} At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

A few weeks ago, Dave and I decided to take the tour at Stone Brewery. A stroll through the gift shop is all you need to see the ugly creature featured on every label and bottle of Stone's many beers. According to the art director at Stone there is a story behind the creature that they call a gargoyle.

"As the story goes... First came the name "Stone." Co-founders Greg Koch and Steve Wagner wanted something that conveyed a traditional European motif, just like the beers they initially planned to brew. Since gargoyles are made of stone and were seen as protectors, it seemed like a natural fit. Plus, it went hand-in-hand with Stone's philosophy: The gargoyle warding off the modern-day evil spirits of beer, such as chemical additives, cheap adjuncts and pasteurization."¹

So now you know.

Gargoyles have always been interesting to me. If you want to get technical a true gargoyle is a spout used to direct water away from the masonry of a building to protect it from water damage. The word gargoyle means "throat" and they date back to ancient Egypt. But what many of us call gargoyles are the medieval creature perched and jetting out of gothic architecture, including many churches and cathedrals. What is interesting to me is why you would put such ugly and frightening creatures on the outside of such beautiful buildings. As the story goes, though perhaps legend is a better word, a Bishop in the 600's slayed a dragon that threatened their village after subduing it with a crucifix. It was burned at the stake but its head wouldn't burn so he put it on the side of the building to ward off any dragon or evil from threatening again.

The correct names for these creatures that do not function as water spouts are grotesques or hunky punks. Some are humorous, bearing the face of monks or the stone mason. There is a Darth Vader grotesque at the National Cathedral. But for the most part, they are intended to be frightening and looming. Which once again begs the question, "Why would you put such a thing on a church?" The answers vary. Sometimes they were made to look like pagan God's and they served as a threat to those who worshipped them. Sometimes they were understood as protectors, warding off evil spirits. Sometimes they were interpreted as threats to those who dare believe anything but Christianity. There are all kinds of stories. But I have a story that I like better.

Instead of the Christian message being threatening and used to subdue and threaten people, in my story, those demons are hitting the road. They are fleeing the church. They are busting through the walls to get out – because Jesus is in town and he has come to clean house!

If gargoyles and hunky punks are supposed to keep the evil spirits out of the church – they don't work. In fact, one of the evil spirits inhabiting the church is the inability to recognize the evil spirits inhabiting the church!

In Jesus' day, the evil spirits were in the synagogue. Self-righteous scribes and priests condemning the very people it was supposed to protect. They had no problem taking the last cent of a widow. Later in the gospel of Mark, Jesus is quoted as saying, "*Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.*" (Mark 12:38-40 NRSV)

¹ <http://coolmaterial.com/feature/the-labels-of-stone-brewing/>

Evidently, these religious leaders abused their power. They were all about appearances. They turned the Law into a wall that no one could scale. They were so concerned about adherence to the Law that they had no compassion. There were demons in the church the day Jesus showed up. And this showdown is only the beginning of the conflict that will escalate as the gospel progresses. Jesus challenges business as usual. What looks like the story of an exorcism of a man, is really the story of the exorcism of the synagogue. This is not unlike Jesus cleansing the temple later on in the gospel when he gets to Jerusalem. "Be silent!" he said. "Get out!" he said. They don't go easy. There is kicking and screaming.

Things are a little different today. Our church is much more democratic than the Jewish system of Jesus' day. You can fire me. But I do wonder what demons Jesus might encounter if he walked into a Christian Church today. (Please note: I am speaking about Christianity in general, not our church, or any one church specifically.) So if Jesus showed up what would he challenge? Who would be worried? What feathers would he ruffle? What voices would he silence? What evil would he cast out?

Do we have to name it? Do we really have to look under the rugs and under the sinks? Do we have to stir up trouble? Can we just handle this quietly and discreetly? We don't want conflict? What if our big givers leave?

Do you hear the resistance? Blissful ignorance is so much better. Demons? Here? What?

Sexual Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Condemnation of the LGBTIQ community, Exploitation of the Poor, the Endorsement of Violence against others, the Rejection and Condemnation of People of other Religions, Disregard and Abuse of Resources and the Environment, and every ...ISM that plagues this nation: Racism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ageism, Antisemitism, Colonialism, Religious Imperialism, Ableism, Traditionalism, Cisgenderism, Classism, Nativism and a host of other isms I missed.

The news is full of stories where such demons have been found thriving in churches and in people of faith. It is quite possible, there are a few right here in this room.

It seems we are most vulnerable to evil when we think we are above it – when we think we are too holy to be infected. "Not in our church!" we might be tempted to say. "Not in my heart!" Those demons are in Paula White and Franklin Graham, not here. Not here (point to heart).

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a famous Russian author, was accused treason and imprisoned in a gulag because of his controversial writing. His years in this brutal work camp gave him much time to ponder things like good and evil. He came to this conclusion: "Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small corner of evil." (The Gulag Archipelago (1973))

The unclean spirit in the story cries out to Jesus, "What have you to do with us?" Which sounds a lot like, "Surely you don't think we have issues we need to work on?" "Jesus, the church down the street, they're the ones you are looking for."

The #MeToo movement has stirred up this kind of defensiveness. It raises a subject people don't want to talk about? It challenges behavior that some people think is perfectly acceptable? It challenges systems that perpetuate and tolerate abuse. It exposes dirty secrets and taps a cesspool of shame. Perpetrators are claiming it is lies and misunderstanding. People who don't want to deal with it want women to quit whining about the past. Survivors are feeling empowered and validated and even healed.

No one likes to be challenged. No one likes to hear that something they do or believe or say is devastating to another human. No one wants to believe they participate in systems that benefit a privileged few and hurt the most

vulnerable. No one wants Jesus to show up can clean house. So, we get those demons when they say, “What have you to do with us?”

Sometimes the awful work of following Jesus is the awful work of looking in the mirror and confronting the demons within – be it the church or our own persons.

We are pretty clear around here that we are imperfect – which is another way of saying there is always more for us to work on. This is the place where we can work on our imperfections – with a spirit of grace and truth. Imperfection is a much softer word than evil or demon...but it is really the same thing. What needs to go? What needs work? Instead of getting defensive we can say, “Search our hearts – show us what we need to work on.”

If we had hunky punks and gargoyles here at FCCO I'd like to think they are on their way out rather than sitting comfortably on the ledges.

Amen.