

January 29, 2012
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Deuteronomy 18: 15–20
Mark 1: 21–28

“Silencing Unclean Spirits”

Her name will grab your attention, if nothing else about her does ... River Jordan from Nashville, TN. ([Guideposts Magazine](#), January 2012, “Faith and Living,” River Jordan, pg.48-51) Three years ago her two sons were both deployed just after the Christmas holidays, ...one to Iraq and the other to Afghanistan. She was very anxious for their safety, ...their safe return, ...and she secretly wondered if they would ever all be together again. River, a deeply spiritual person, felt a strong need within herself to have herself and her family held in prayer by others. That’s when she came up with the idea of a New Year’s Resolution that seemed very irrational, even to herself: During the course of each day, she would randomly pick out a complete stranger, she would introduce herself to them and tell them that she would be thinking of them throughout the day and praying for them.

How many of us would ever do this? After making the resolution, River’s first encounter went like this: She was in a bus station and realized out of her unconscious observance of all the activity going on around her that her attention was drawn by this one woman in particular. River was sure the woman would think she was crazy, but she mustered up the courage, went over to her and said, “Hi, my name is River, and I have this resolution to pray for a stranger every day. Today, you are my stranger, and so I will be thinking of you, saying special prayers for you throughout the day.”

“Oh, honey!” replied the stranger, “My name is Annie. This is unbelievable! Do you know what I was saying to God just this morning?”

“No ma’am...”

“I was saying my prayers when I asked God, ‘Is there anybody in this whole wide world who is praying for me?’”

River kept her resolution for that year. In fact she went well beyond praying for just 365 people in that year. And I believe she continues today, because of what this practice did for her in her own spiritual life. She would pray for cashiers, men working out on the street, folks waiting in lines, the mechanic who would fix her car. She says that there is this inner voice that urges her on and tells her whom to pray for. And, an important part of this resolution turned daily exercise for

River is to understand that she would approach the person and tell them she would be praying for them. You see, it is one thing to stay off at a distance and anonymously pray for someone, and quite another to speak with them and let them know you are doing this. Very, very few were put off by her effort.

Truth is, none of us has to look far to see and observe what I would call "unclean spirits" in this world. They are everywhere. And not to be too fundamental or too mysterious about this, an unclean spirit is any reality in our lives that is reflective of the brokenness, the sinfulness, the pain and agony we endure, the anti-goodness of God in this world in which we live. You can see it everywhere: T.V., Court Street, county detention center, soup kitchen, Help Center, City Hall, Congress, Pentagon, yes, ...in my home and in yours, true, ...right here in the church. Sin is the ultimate threat to our existence in this world. We cannot escape it. That is why the Gospel is such unadulterated good news for all of us; that's why my brother-in-law, Jim Richardson said last week: "Jesus Came Preaching!" Jesus has come into all our lives preaching the good news, ...the Kingdom of God has come near ... is at hand, "...and for that," Jim said, "each and every one of us ought to fall down on our knees and give thanks!" How true! How true!!

I got into some trouble with my Bible study class the other night when I said that Mark's primary purpose in writing his Gospel was to proclaim to all who would listen and hear and believe that the Reign of God has now come! The reality, the power and the presence of the Kingdom of God has now broken through into the world, and for all who will see, hear and believe. This new reality determines who we are! And being determined, as we are; made to be disciples by the Holy Spirit, God is using us, the church, to transform and shape this world. In this brief story of Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum, we are given a glimpse of how we are being empowered to do precisely that in the world today.

In our lesson, Jesus has left the Jordan Valley down in Judea and has gone north to Galilee, ...to Capernaum. We are still in the first chapter. Jesus has been baptized by John in the River Jordan (don't you love that name?). Remember, as he came up out of the water, the sky tore apart and the glory of God broke through upon him and upon us, like as a dove descending from heaven. Jesus heard the voice of God, confirming him and his ministry. And, as Richard Deibert has so well said: "(As we read about the life and ministry of Jesus in

Mark), Mark wants us to recognize the rule of almighty God in the life, love, and longing of this Jesus from Nazareth. Mark wants us to receive the sum of Jesus' ministry---his mighty deeds, his dignifying care, his wise instruction, his laughter and anger, his tears of joy and lament---as an accurate picture of God personally reigning among us." (Deibert, Richard. Interpretation Bible Studies: Mark. Pg. 16).

On the Sabbath, in Capernaum, Jesus went into the synagogue and was teaching. What do you think he was teaching? He was teaching about the Kingdom of God that is now right here! He wasn't giving those same old week to week, stale, Sunday School lessons about Jewish Law and what one needs to do to be in conformity with the Mosaic Law, what you must do to be a good Jew, or, in our case, a good Christian. He was telling them that through the power of your baptism by Holy Spirit, a free, unmerited gift from God in Heaven to you, ...your sins are forgiven. You are a child of God simply by receiving what He is offering and by believing. And all the people were amazed because Jesus taught these things as though he knew for a fact, beyond any shadow of doubt.

In the middle of his lesson, ...a man appeared and began shouting at Jesus, defying him, accusing him of coming to destroy them. And in this moment, this is the lesson given to us: The power of the Word of God, both embodied in the person of Jesus, and transmitted in the words he spoke to the man, shut the unclean spirit down and cast it out.

Interestingly, Mark really doesn't tell us what happened to the man who formerly had the "unclean spirit," but I know what happened to him, and I will tell you, ...he was healed. He became a disciple. Through the power of his baptism by the Holy Spirit, he became a new person; ...a new creation. Everything old has passed away. Everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Notice that Mark doesn't make any effort to explain the evil, the brokenness, the temptations and the sinfulness that afflicts our lives. In his own way, he simply acknowledges its reality, as do we. Just look around. What we see in our lesson is Jesus, possessed by the Spirit of God, being confronted in a world possessed by unclean spirits. In this state of affairs, Mark wants us to see, ...and to believe with all our hearts, that because God's Kingdom has now come in Jesus, those unclean spirits cannot, do not, will never stand. In Jesus the backs of sin and sickness, evil and death are broken. Because the Kingdom of

God is now the new reality of our lives and our existence in this world, unclean spirits, though a very real part of this world we live in, have no power over those who believe.

You might say to me, "Gillespie, get real. This world is a mess. Our lives are a mess, filled with pain, frustration and disappointment." And I say to you, "Yes. But this won't last. Turn back to God. Receive the forgiveness offered to you. Hold fast to the Good News. Mark wants us to know that even though the Kingdom in large part is hidden from our sight, ...even though we look into a mirror dimly, ...when we look with the eyes of faith, we can see it! We see it in acts of kindness, justice, service and love for others.

Our friend River Jordan from Nashville, TN came upon this realization when, out of her own need for prayer, she took upon herself the risk and the challenge of giving to others what she most needed for herself ...the gift of prayer. Her prayers for others cast out the unclean. Her prayers made a new space in the midst of the old. They displaced the unclean and gave sin no free space to dominate. Her prayers for others made space in this broken world for the Reign of God to prevail.

All of us have a ways to go, my friends, on our wilderness journeys through this world. As disciples of Jesus, ...as the Body of Christ in the world, we are empowered through Holy Spirit to confront the unclean spirits of this world. In fact, it is our task to do so. We do it when we feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, when we visit and care for those who are imprisoned whatever the bars of their cells may be. We silence the unclean spirits of this world when we do justice, love kindness, and worship our God in Spirit and in truth.

In our lesson from Deuteronomy, we heard the voice of Moses promising his people that God would raise up prophets from among their own people, prophets who would guide God's people in the paths God intends for them. I think we see such prophets in the River Jordans among us.

Through the grace of God, Mark's message has reached our ears. He wants us to know that all who respond to the call of this Jesus of Nazareth to come and follow Him, we are duly put on notice: this "demon-dashing, law-transcending Son of God has arrived in the person of Jesus, and He expects of those who respond and follow Him far more than just to stand back and observe in "amazement" the presence of the Kingdom in our midst (Gary Charles. Feasting on the Word. Year B,

Vol. 1, pg. 313). He expects us to use our hearts, our minds, our bodies, ...our hands and arms, our feet and legs, our eyes, our ears, our voices, to enter in to the messiness and the brokenness of this world and empowered by Holy Spirit, ...to use all we have been given to silence unclean spirits, and make space for the Kingdom of God in this world.