

“Spirits in the Church”

Mark 1:21-28

As you saw this sermon title this morning, I'd be curious to know just where your mind went. (I wonder about that a lot... just where DID their mind go...? Or wait, maybe I should ask that of MYSELF...) Anyway, when you read about 'Spirits in the church,' you may have thought about ...THESE kind of 'spirits.' **[Bayou rum]** A different kind of 'spirit' that we don't normally associate with being in church. (Even if sometimes we might wish we HAD some of those in a worship service... maybe about the time of the sermon...)

I can remember the first time I went to a different 'place of worship'... the revered LC establishment, "HokusPokus" (a beer/wine/liquor store)... and came across something that I just HAD to purchase. **["Spiritual Advisor" shot glass]** I mean, after all, it IS what I am...

Of course, we are NOT going to be considering the merits... or DE-merits... of partaking of adult beverages. (Tho I always have found it interesting that some of our Episcopalian brethren allow for such at church-based events. Hmmm... maybe they're on to something...) We WILL be considering, however, how Jesus dealt with 'spirits in the church' of a different type. Ones that, like their 'liquid' counterparts, had a profound, mind-altering effect on the individual lives of those gathered for worship. And, just as we must be with alcohol, we should be very mindful of the harmful effects that spiritual forces can have on the 'body'... of Christ, that is... His church.

We should first, however, remember the GOOD work of spiritual forces. Whether or not you and I give the power of God's HOLY Spirit its **due** in our own personal lives, or in the life of the church, I hope that we could agree that the 3rd person of the Trinity... God the Spirit... is a vitally **important** part of our identity as followers of Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel, Jesus told Nicodemus, a highly regarded Jewish religious leader, that ***"no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit."*** (John 3:5-6) Later on in that same Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that ***"the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach***

you everything and make you remember all that I have told you.” (John 14:26) It is only with the ‘HELP’ of the Holy Spirit that we can enter into God’s Kingdom... and be reminded along the way of just how to live as true members of that Kingdom.

In a letter to Titus, a fellow member of God’s ‘Kingdom,’ Paul says that ***“The Spirit’s presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all. (1 Corinthians 12:7)*** It is by the Spirit of God within each one of us that we can ‘in deed and in truth’ serve for “the good of all.” Whether it’s in the life of the gathered church -- as a Praise Team/Choir member or as an Elder, as a Worship leader or a Greeter, or simply as one who comes in worship or study of Almighty God... OR as we seek to be the ‘church’ out in our community-- by tutoring young people, or visiting the hurting, or contributing to the needs of the downtrodden, or lifting up the ‘spirits’ of a friend, co-worker, or perfect stranger... we should never forget that the presence of God’s Holy Spirit within each one of us IS shown in some way as we seek to live for the ‘good of all.’

This being said, we must also acknowledge that there are spirits that can be displayed in our lives that are NOT of God. In this opening chapter of Mark’s Gospel, we read that ***“there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit.” (Mark 1:23)*** I do NOT believe it to be mere ‘coincidence,’ a ‘random’ occurrence, that the very first miracle performed by Jesus involves a confrontation with an ‘unclean spirit.’ In fact, the ‘beloved disciple’ John, in his first epistle, declared that ***“the son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil.” (1 John 3:8b)*** And not only did he confront a ‘work of the devil,’ but that this struggle between good/evil takes place in the synagogue on the Sabbath... or, to make it more relevant to our experience, in CHURCH on a SUNDAY!

Now, does the thought of Jesus having this ‘close encounter of a spiritual kind’ in ‘church’ on the Sabbath... with someone who had entered the temple with all the rest of the ‘regular worshippers’... give any of you ‘cause for pause?’ That there might be an ‘unclean’ or ‘evil’ spirit dwelling in the person sitting next to you? (Husbands and wives, you don’t count. You already know that...)

OK, about you spouses, I really am kidding... sort of. For there certainly IS the power of spirits ruled by the ‘prince of darkness’ that CAN rear their ugly head in **marital relationships.**

Too often we can say some terrible, hurtful things to those closest to us. And, you've probably heard that old saying: **"God don't like ugly!"**

But aside from the influence of evil in our interpersonal relationships, there can also be 'ugly' spirits present in the life our churches. Spirits that can manifest themselves in very insidious ways. Spirits of **'negativity.'** Spirits of **'criticism.'** Spirits of **'complacency.'** Though they may be fed by that same more tangible unclean, evil spirit that spoke through the man in the synagogue, it is THESE unhealthy 'spirits' that are the *messengers*...

Particularly as a church that is concerned about its future, and just how God is going to use this particular body of believers, we must be on guard against spirits of negativity. When someone ... perhaps even one who is in the pew around you... comments on what we DON'T have in comparison to other churches, remind them of what we DO have: A supportive, encouraging, prayerful FAMILY whose heart, mind, and doors are always open. A loving, serving, faith-filled congregation who has an abiding trust in God's providence. For our God IS good... ALL the time. AND, we should also bear in mind that this 'good God's' presence is NOT dependent on how many (pardon my expression) 'butts' are in the pews!

We must also be on guard against spirits of criticism. Particularly of our church leaders. And their decisions. Are they perfect? Hello... of *course not!* That being said, 'he/she who is without fault shall cast the first stone.' BUT these flawed leaders have been called by a perfect God to do their best to lead this body. And it's kind of like I say about our current President. He most CERTAINLY is not perfect. (I KNOW that I could get an 'AMEN!') And yet, he has been entrusted by God with the leadership of this 'body' known as the United States of America. A responsibility that not many of us would want. And just as we must pray for our church leaders, we most assuredly need to pray for our nation's leaders... from the top down. That they will be given the wisdom that they need... for THE 'Top down'...

Let us also pray to God to be delivered from spirits of complacency. In these safe, secure, comfy little 'holy huddles' of ours, it's easy to simply come to church, share some 'happy hugs and handshakes,' ponder some 'songs and Scripture,' and then go on our merry way. However, every time that we leave this sanctuary, we should bear in mind the

commission Jesus left us with as he left his earthly 'sanctuary': ***"Go and make disciples... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."*** (Matthew 28:19-20)

He didn't say, 'Go and make yourself comfortable.' 'Go and make a sandwich.' 'Go and take a nap.' Jesus said to ***"Go and make disciples."*** And remember, he wasn't talking to some megachurch congregation... but to a small group of faithful followers. Probably about 12 or so. Hmmmm... I see more than that here... SO, each of us should ask ourselves, "what am I doing to 'make disciples'?"

But the fact that Jesus encountered such harmful spirit in the context of the larger 'church' should not obscure the fact that the ***"unclean spirit"*** took up residency in an **individual**. This experience reminds us that each one of us can be plagued by evil spirits... demons that cloud our judgment and darken our faith. Spirits of addictions... of fear... of doubt... of lack of self-worth. Spirits that can cause us to doubt the very existence of the One who was sent to release us from those fears, doubts, and struggles. The One whose very coming into our world was done to show us just how **valuable** we are! That ***"God so loved the world that He sent his only beloved Son..."*** And to make it much more personal, you should put the personal pronoun 'me' in place of 'world'—***"God so loved ME that He sent his only beloved Son..."*** THAT's how important you are to God...

Just as God sent Jesus into that Synagogue to confront the evil spirit in that troubled man, so too does God send Jesus to US to confront whatever 'spirits of darkness' that are troubling US. As I said earlier, in the words of John, ***"The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil."*** (1 John 3:8b)

Believe it or not, the devil IS at work on you! Even at this moment. In the words of Scripture, he waits like a 'crouching lion' at the door, waiting to pounce on you at the very moment you come out of your spiritual 'high' of worship. Ready to fill you with spirits of distraction... those insidious internal voices of evil that make you question your worth...your purpose... your values... your GOD. But if we will but look into the face of Christ... just as that man in the church did... Jesus will confront the evil that is seeking to take residence in us. Jesus says to all that is unclean in us, ***"Be silent, and come out!"*** For, as those amazed onlookers noted, our Lord speaks ***"with authority"***... 'authority' like NO other. ***"He commands even the***

unclean spirits, and they obey him.” BOTH good and evil in that room recognized His power...SO, shouldn't WE?!

Yesterday, as I sat in my home witnessing the rain, the lightning and thunder, I was very appreciative of God's power. Not only in the forces of *nature* in the world *around me*, but the force of His *Spirit within me*. The unique, authoritative ability of God to bring peace in the midst of the storm. And I was reminded of a time when some faithful followers of Jesus were caught in a storm, fearing for their lives, doubting if God would really protect them. Perhaps listening to 'voices' of negativity and skepticism. Even though the very embodiment of God, His Son Jesus, was right there with them all the time. So unfazed by the storm around Him that he SLEPT! And we know what happened next: ***“And He awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.”*** (Mark 4:39)

Whatever 'storms' we may encounter... as a 'boatload' of believers, or as individual followers of Christ... may we never doubt that God is with us. Always in our midst. Always ready to look whatever swirling spirits of doubt and fear that may be churning within us right in the 'eye of the storm' and say, ***“Peace! Be still!”*** The Jesus who is always there to bring us ***“a great calm.”*** And may all His disciples... wind blown, and Savior shown... say in one voice, 'AMEN!'