

A good story always has some element of drama; something exciting, emotional or unexpected. This story, from the Gospel of Mark, has all of the above. In terms of drama, it's clear that the people attending synagogue that day did not expect to hear a new young rabbi teaching with such confidence. They were astounded by him even before the exchange with the unclean spirit. But, wow did the unclean spirit stir some excitement! As Jesus is teaching, a voice cries out from the crowd, clearly accusing him of ill intent. But also, ironically, naming him as the Holy One of God. This story begins and ends with the writer trying to make the point that Jesus astounds and amazes with his new authoritative teaching which can heal those who hear it.

Now, of course, many hear this story, and others like it from the Gospels, and immediately think of exorcisms; specifically as such are portrayed in movies. And while this ancient practice has been overdramatized, there is an interesting history to it that is not quite as scary as what we see on the big screen.

In an article entitled “The real history of exorcisms that you don't see in movies”, National Geographic journalist MELISSA SARTORE writes about the history of this ritual practice. Apparently “Converts and aspiring Christians [in the 4th century A.D] underwent daily morning exorcism in the lead up to baptism.” A candidate for baptism would prove their dedication to Christianity with personal prayers thought of as a form of "self-exorcism." And on the day of their baptism, (clearly before the era of COVID) a bishop would blow on them, literally blowing evil influences off of them. And in the moments just before being baptized, they were anointed with oil that had itself been exorcized. Another interesting historical fact about exorcisms involves Martin Luther who in 1526, added exorcism to Protestant baptismal rites for infants. Rather than casting out a demonic presence, infant exorcism was done to help the baby reject the devil, sin and evil throughout their lifetime (Historian Elizabeth Yuko).

So weekly rituals, personal prayers, blowing away evil, oil that had been purified, and babies that had been exorcized. These are some of the ways the idea of the authority of Jesus have been carried forward into the practices of the church and the lives of people of Christian faith.

What I gather from these various historical examples is that exorcism, in many cases, has been understood as an ongoing process of taking action to rid oneself of malicious forces. But what kind of malice are we talking about?

We're not given that much information about how the unclean spirit engaged with, and then lived through, the man from the Gospel of Mark. Did he seek out the unholy and harmful spirit, or did it somehow come to him unbidden? Was it greed or anger, hate or vengeance that came with the spirit's presence? We don't know if he hurt other people because of it, or if he simply suffered internally. We don't know.

What we do know is that he was at the synagogue, and that no one seemed surprised by his presence. So he could very well have been a part of that community. And we know, from the passage itself, that the unclean spirit caused him great pain. Modern day health professionals would likely say that his behavior suggests he had experienced some kind of trauma in his life; something that caused lasting adverse effects on his physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

The Greek word used in this passage for unclean spirit is A-kath-ar-tos, which means foul or lewd. It's NOT referred to as a demon, but as a foul or lewd presence. Jesus expresses sharp disapproval of the presence and demands that it leave the man. He does not call the "unclean spirit" evil, but he does react to it as something that is harmful, and his response is to heal the man. There's a lot we don't know about the man with the unclean spirit, but one thing we absolutely know is that he was in pain. And I view his crying out as an act of bravery; of reaching for life by pushing past the power of what held him in bondage. He knew he was in need of Jesus' help.

This Gospel story invites us to wonder about the presence of behaviors that cause us harm. It invites us to wonder if we have any habits or ingrained ways, similar to that of the unclean spirit, that hurt us or others or cause distress. And, I would suggest that this story urges us to consider how we might respond to the powerful authoritative healing teachings of Jesus. How can we push past what binds us or limits us and take hold of life?

Healing doesn't usually happen as suddenly as this story suggests. Healing is not a linear process. It happens in more of a spiral fashion. Things get processed cyclically and each time it comes around, you peel back another layer and get closer to the core. Healing is the process of making or becoming sound or healthy again.

Let me tell you a story about a woman from the High Middle Ages who regularly addressed this issue. Her name was Hildegard of Bingen. Many of you will have heard of her before. She was a writer, composer, philosopher, Christian mystic, German Benedictine abbess who also practiced medicine, and was often sought for advice on matters of healing.

Hildegard was once contacted by an Abbot from another town about a woman obsessed by an evil spirit who he had been unable to help.

Diagnosing the case as one of clouded intellect and religious mania, Hildegard prescribed an exorcism of ritual beating of the woman by seven priests in the company of the congregation. The Abbot tried this violent shaming approach and it did not work.

Because of Hildegard's great popularity as a teacher and healer, the afflicted woman insisted that she needed to be in the presence of the abbess in order to be healed. And so Hildegard and the nuns of the convent apprehensively welcomed her into their community. From early February until Easter not only the nuns, but the men and women of the entire region prayed for, fasted on behalf of and gave gifts to the convent for the benefit of that woman. Hildegard worked with her directly, correcting the woman when her religious passions veered off track. And after weeks of living in the community, and being supported by the members of the congregation, the woman was freed of the "wicked spirit." During a service on Maundy Thursday she was released from the grip of her obsession and is said to have "remained sound in mind and body for the rest of her life."

This woman experienced healing because the people around her loved her into the light. It did not happen suddenly. It took days and days of working toward change. It took days and days of moving closer to the presence of Divine Love. This IS how we push past what binds us or limits us, taking hold of life.

By believing that the Spirit is truly present, and opening ourselves to the authoritative power of Christ (a power that works in direct opposition to the feelings or behaviors that might do harm) the Living Light of Christ can heal. It can undergird our efforts to reclaim our lives when trauma or pain has crippled us. It's not magic, or spooky. It's simply the process of becoming sound or healthy again by responding to the Holy One of God; seeking wholeness and balance spiritually in combination with professional medical help when needed.

The healing that we all desire is not something that occurs quickly, easily or in isolation from others. But it is something that is possible. May we be a community where such healing is well known and supported. May we be people who bravely reach toward life together and so find wholeness.

Amen.