

At Salem, the congregation where I served in Toledo, there was a boy named Tim. Nine years old when he started coming, all by himself, he was always hungry, usually disheveled, and most often late. Sometimes he'd arrive during the sermon, in which case he'd walk down the aisle, right up to the chancel, right up to the preacher—and he'd interrupt me, and begin a conversation, usually about God, right in the middle of the sermon. That's what seems to me to be happening in today's gospel lesson.

Jesus is in the synagogue, reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. He's giving a sermon; he's proclaiming the good news of God for God's people, the Jews, and a man shows up and walks right up to him, and just like Tim, interrupts the sermon. This man—or, more precisely, the unclean spirit in the man, attempts to start a conversation with Jesus, crying 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." I can imagine Jesus' internal reaction to this disturbance because I know what it feels like to be interrupted during a sermon!

Jesus, at least externally, seems to be unperturbed, undisturbed by the man with the unclean spirit who enters the synagogue. Instead, he is ready to respond to the man and his request for exorcism. He rebukes the spirit, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him." Jesus' proclamation of the good news to the congregation in the synagogue seems to flow effortlessly into delivering the good news to this one individual; he moves from preaching to healing without any apparent internal disturbance. He takes the man with the unclean spirit as he is, receives the interruption in his preaching graciously, and then uses the incident to witness to the goodness of God, even in the midst of whatever discomfort he might have been experiencing internally at the man's bizarre behavior.

And bizarre behavior it is, indeed. Who comes into the synagogue, right into the sanctuary, and addresses the preacher: "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!"? Who does that? And who refers to themselves in both singular and plural form? Is this spirit one or many? Why does the man refer to himself as both "us" and "I"? The behavior of this man is bizarre; it makes those around him feel uncomfortable.

In the ancient world, the condition yielding such bizarre behavior was labeled "demon possession;" in those days, strange behavior that could not be explained was attributed to a demon or "an unclean spirit." Whereas today we might explain such behavior by diagnosing the man with a mental illness or a brain disease or an addiction, in ancient Israel such strange behavior was labeled as "possession by an unclean spirit." Now, "unclean" in this context does not mean merely "dirty," as in a "dirty," smelly person. "Unclean" means "impure." In the world of the author of Mark's gospel, uncleanness was not merely a matter of hygiene but rather a matter of theology.

For first century Jews in Palestine, purity was a primary virtue. Their common life, which was centered in the temple, was organized around purity. God, who was pure, could not tolerate impurity. If an impure human dared approach God, chaos could result. God was threatened by people who were menstruating or had recently given birth or who had a disability, as well as individuals who had touched a dead body or were demon-possessed. Impurity was dangerous, according to first century Jews, not just because God's people would get "dirty" if they had contact with someone who was unclean, but more so because, if too much impurity was allowed into the temple, God might leave! If those who were impure entered the temple—or went beyond a certain point in the temple, a point beyond which God

could not tolerate impurity—God might abandon God’s people! So the Jews practiced purity laws and purification rituals.

For Jesus, however, and for those who follow him, life is organized not around purity laws but around Jesus’ presence. When Jesus enters the temple—or Simon Peter’s house—or the house of a sinner, he has no fear of being made impure by contact with impurity. Jesus’ purity is so pure, in fact, that his presence consumes any impurity around him. His holiness is so holy that it makes everything he touches—and everyone around him—holy. Rather than pronouncing a threat that God will vacate the temple if impurity is allowed in, Jesus boldly erases impurity by infiltrating it with his purity, by smearing it with his holiness. Think about how you smeared antibacterial cleanser on your hands to prevent the spread of COVID. That’s how Jesus smears his holiness around. He’s not afraid to confront impurity, because he knows that his presence—his purity—his holiness—will infiltrate it—and destroy it.

For you and for me, 21st century followers of Jesus with a modern world view, what does this story mean? We’re not so concerned with purity, and most of the phenomena which we experience are explainable, aren’t they? In ancient Jewish cosmology, there were a variety of beings, some of whom had bodies and spirits, and some of whom had only spirits, like angels or fallen angels or seraphim or demons. For ancient Jews, this concept of “unclean spirits” was meaningful—and helpful. For us, though, perhaps not so much. For you and for me, not so likely to encounter angels or demons or ghosts, how do we receive the behavior of someone “with an unclean spirit”? What happens to us when someone acts in a strange way, as though she has an “unclean spirit”? What do we do when someone who seems strange to us comes into King of Kings?

The scene in today’s gospel story was enacted over and over again in my years at Salem. Strange behavior was not uncommon as we gathered to hear God’s Word proclaimed. Besides Tim, there was Albert, a Vietnam vet who lived in a different reality than most of us due to PTSD. He came into the office about once a month for supplies for his ministry of blessing others; he would ask for 20 copies each of a “Mother of the Year Award” certificate and a million-dollar bill, which he would then pass out in the neighborhood. There was Sylvia, who introduced herself as the Bride of Christ and told me that she was writing a book, and that she was planning to make it into a movie as a fundraiser for Salem. When she showed me the book, I realized that she was copying the New Testament letter of Ephesians, verse by verse, by hand. Some movie that would make! There was another Sylvia, who told me that she was the mother of the Messiah; she showed me her son’s high school graduation picture, and he didn’t look much like Jesus to me! And then there was Highway, among others, one among many who was losing his battle with alcoholism; he once came to worship after drinking seven 40-ounce bottles of beer!

The people in Jesus’ day experienced such strange behaviors as I encountered at Salem as “demon possession;” they thought of someone like Albert or Sylvia as a person who had an “unclean spirit.” We moderns, however, would more likely describe such suffering as a result of mental illness or addiction or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or neuro diversity or growing up in an alcoholic family or rape or severe abuse or neglect. There could, indeed, be many causes—and many explanations—of bizarre behavior such as the character in today’s story exhibits.

What happens when you encounter someone like the “man with an unclean spirit”? When you meet someone who is different from you, someone who cannot see, for example, someone who cannot speak, how do you respond? When you come upon someone who violates your personal space or who won’t look you in the eye, what do you think? When you meet someone who doesn’t seem to be able to

control her muscles properly or who smells bad, what do you do? Perhaps you feel uncomfortable, not knowing what to do, not knowing how to respond.

For you, this “man with an unclean spirit” in today’s story might be someone who is mentally ill or has mental or physical limitations, someone who is unable to walk or to talk, to see or to hear, someone who is addicted, someone who is gay or lesbian or trans—or who identifies as neither a boy nor a girl, someone who is homeless and has no place to shower or brush her teeth, someone who is arrogant or judgmental, even if they are hiding insecurity behind an attitude of superiority. Who is the person “with an unclean spirit” for you?

What strikes me in this gospel story is the way the author introduces the “man with an unclean spirit.” He doesn’t call him “an epileptic” or “a paranoid schizophrenic” or “a demoniac.” I think this is because Jesus sees him first and foremost as a person who happens to be a man, and, only later, as a man with a particular malady. To Jesus, the man is not primarily a curious specimen—or the subject of a pitiful label—or the bearer of a sorry condition; rather, he is, first of all, a human being, made in the image of God. The gospel-writer’s choice of word order is significant. In this story, the report of the condition of the man comes only after his identification as a man. That is to say, neither Jesus nor the gospel-writer labels the man by his condition. The man is a person first and only secondarily a man—and then a man who has an “unclean spirit.” The phrase “with an unclean spirit” describes the man, but it doesn’t define him. Before he is known by Jesus as someone “with an unclean spirit,” he is known as a man, a person, a human being, a child of God.

How does this choice of word order work in your own speech? Do you define the people around you by their sociological status or by their humanity? For example, do you look at a woman who is in a wheelchair as “a crippled woman”—or as a woman who happens to be confined to a wheelchair? Do you look at a family member who is addicted to alcohol as an “alcoholic” or an “addict”—or as an uncle who is chemically dependent? Do you see a neighbor whose skin color is different from yours as “African American” or “white”—or as a person of African or European heritage? When you look at me, do you see a “woman pastor”—or a pastor who happens to be a woman? How does your choice of language influence your viewpoint, your perspective, your attitude toward the person about whom you are speaking?

And what about you, yourself? Do you ever feel uncomfortable around yourself because you’re “unemployed” or “diabetic” or “a dropout”? What if you think of yourself, not as “unemployed,” but as someone who has lost your job in a severely depressed economy? What if you define yourself as a woman who has a history of sexual abuse rather than as “an abused woman”? A person who is living with cancer rather than “a cancer victim”? A veteran who is living with disability rather than “a disabled veteran”?

What if, instead of being labeled by your characteristics or circumstances, you define yourself, first of all, as a human being, a person made in the image of God—and only secondarily as someone who is non-binary or male or female, sober or addicted, incarcerated or free, uneducated or educated? Do you see the subtle differences in these two ways of looking at a person, whether at someone else or at yourself? Are you defined by your humanity, or by a label others paste on you, a label such as “queer” or “nerd” or “failure”? Do you define others by their humanity or by a tag such as “insane” or “paraplegic”? Do you take people as they are, so that their identity is first and foremost as child of God and only secondarily as someone of a particular gender or ethnicity or educational level or social status? Do you take yourself as you are, as a child of God?

Jesus leads the way here, as he always does. He approaches the man in the synagogue as a fellow human being, taking him just as he is. He receives the interruption in his preaching graciously, and he uses the incident to witness to the goodness of God, regardless of whatever discomfort he might experience internally at the man's bizarre behavior. Jesus treats him as a child of God. He accepts him as he is, even with his "unclean spirit." Jesus sets the example; he shows the man how he deserves to be treated, and he shows those in the synagogue how to treat one another. In this encounter with the "man with the unclean spirit," Jesus leads the way; he shows you how to love the family member who drives you crazy, just as she is; how to receive the stranger who makes you feel uncomfortable, just as he is. Jesus sees the person first as a child of God—and invites you to do the same. Period.

Perhaps, today, it's Jesus who is the Interrupter, Jesus who interrupts the sermon, Jesus who walks into the sanctuary and up to the chancel and starts talking, Jesus who enters at the wrong time, arriving without warning, speaking in a loud voice, disturbing you, disturbing me, making us feel uncomfortable. Jesus the Interrupter arrives and invites you and me to accept others just as they are, to approach them as fellow human beings, as fellow children of God, no matter how uncomfortable we feel around them.

And if that's not enough of a shock, not enough of an interruption, Jesus also invites you to accept yourself as you are, just as you are, grieving or addicted or ill or flunking, out of work or without a home, lonely or angry or afraid, full of regrets or self-loathing. No matter how uncomfortable you feel around yourself, dear friend, Jesus accepts you, just as you are. Jesus takes you, just as you are. Jesus takes me, just as I am. Jesus takes all of us, just as we are. That's the interruption in the sermon today. And that's the good news, for you, for me, and for each of God's beloved children, just as they are.
AMEN