

Snuggling with Our Demons

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Texts: Mark 1: 29-39

I'd like to begin today with another reading, one that I imagine many of us are familiar with, and if you're not, I'm thrilled to be the one to introduce it to you. It's an old friend, a poem by Rumi called *The Guest House*.

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Please, will you pray with me. Loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Friends, if you've been here for the last couple of weeks, this Scripture may ring some bells. For the past few Sundays, we've gotten consecutive passages in Mark describing the evolution of Jesus' ministry. In our story today, we are still in Copernaum, Simon's hometown, and we find ourselves with Jesus and his disciples in the home of Simon's mother-in-law, who is in bed sick and delirious with fever. Jesus reaches out his hand to her and helps her to rise, and the fever leaves her. Later on in the day, as the sun

goes down, people come to the house, bringing their neighbors and loved ones who are possessed by demons, seeking the healing hands of Jesus.

On its surface, this reads as a story of Jesus' uniquely miraculous healing powers. It is part of Mark's attempt to share with the early Christian church, who were meeting in houses like Simon's mother-in-law's, what the resurrected reign of Jesus on Earth would look and feel like. Today, though, I want us to explore a different angle: not one of Jesus' unique divinity per se, but the question of what this story has to teach us about how **we** relate to our own and others' demons.

Now, "demon" is a tricky word. For me, it conjures up images of wrinkled and red-faced, menacing creatures who wish me ill. A little bit like that red iPhone emoji with the sharp teeth, but scarier. We often think of demons as the cosmic opposite to angels – evil where angels are good, ugly where angels are beautiful, a burden where angels are a blessing. Demons fall right into the trap of our binary thinking. We use the name "demon" to talk about the parts of ourselves that plague us, that we have trouble loving. We talk about how we "demonize" the opposite side in our context of political polarization, and we often use it to mean "dehumanize" or "make out to be evil." For us in 2024, *demon* is not a nice word.

But it wasn't always this way. In the Greek in which Mark was writing, the word for demon is "daimon," which is often connected etymologically in the Bible to the Hebrew word "shedim." Neither "daimons" nor "shedim" were considered universally evil. They were spirits that didn't have human bodies but needed tending. They were "lesser divinities," not quite God but with some of the same allure and persuasive power. Some sources say that daimons were actually fallen angels. They could be both helpful and hurtful to humans.

We all have our own versions of these daimons. Maybe it's anger or resentment that overtakes you sometimes for no discernible reason. Maybe it's a needy inner child who didn't ever quite get the love that she needed. Maybe it's the sticky belief that we're not enough, that we don't really matter, that our efforts can't make a real difference against the gargantuan forces of injustice that shape our world. Maybe it's a tendency to want to please people such that sometimes you abandon yourself. Maybe it's a heaviness that descends over you, especially after a string of cloudy January days, and your fear that you won't be able to shake it off. Maybe it's the inner critic who beats us up before she turns her criticism

outward. Maybe it's an addiction. Maybe it's the self-doubt and shame that creeps in because of societal messages about our particular embodiment. Maybe it's all of the above and more! It's crowded in here, isn't it!¹

I know I know the feeling of being overtaken by one of these little gremlins and forgetting that who I am is more than any story they could tell about me. I know what it feels like when that demon takes over, and the shame that follows. I imagine we all know some version of that experience, unless there's some super-centered emotional jiu-jitsu master among us, which there may be. If so, come find me after the service, I would love to learn from you.

And so, when we meet the townspeople in Copernaum with their demons, and even Simon's mother-in-law with her fever, I'd like us to imagine ourselves in their shoes: these people have been subsumed by their insecurities, by their disempowering stories, by the residue of their trauma and have lost touch with the part of themselves that is rooted, loving, and secure.

And then, Jesus reaches out his hand. There is something in the way he channels divine unconditional love that reaches into the townspeople, literally quiets the demons, and reminds people of their inherent dignity, their inherent strength. It is the good authority that Dan preached about last week, and it is the power of love. Unconditional love reminds people that who they are is more than the cast of daimons they carry around, more than the fever that overtakes them sometimes. Mark writes, "he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew Him." God's Love, flowing through Jesus in this moment, soothes and quiets the demons. He sees them – I almost imagine him looking them in the eye, not breaking his gaze – and he sees through them to the core belovedness of the people they're inhabiting. They step back, and people are restored to themselves.

When I read this passage from Mark, I was reminded of a story. If you'll indulge me in a little cross-pollination, I'd like to share it with you.

¹ This sermon is deeply inspired by Dr. Richard Schwartz's work on Internal Family Systems. Schwartz calls what I'm calling demons "parts," and the experience of being overtaken by a demon "blending." In Schwartz's conception, our parts are scared or young parts of ourselves that, because of hard emotional experiences, organize themselves to do a job they think will keep the system safe. You can read and learn more from his book: Schwartz, Richard C. *No Bad Parts : Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model*. Sounds True, 2021.

Years ago, I trained to be a hatha yoga teacher. We learned about the history and the context of ancient India in which hatha yoga was born. Our teachers shared that in ancient India, the most dangerous place to be was the crossroads between towns in the middle of the night. Imagine two roads meeting in a dark forest. Tigers are out hunting and you can't see the snakes because it's so dark. Bandits hang out at the crossroads, waiting in the shadows for someone to pass.

And so, you might imagine that for anyone passing through the forested crossroads at night, their demons might begin to surface – their anxiety, their self-doubt, their violence. The philosophers and shapers of hatha yoga wanted to make a practice that would mimic the feeling of someone sitting down in the middle of the cross-roads in the midnight hour, waiting for their demons to appear *so they could get close enough that the person could see the demons' faces and call them by their names*. They wanted to create a physical experience that awakened such intense sensations that people *had* to meet their own demons, and practice sitting with them, getting to know them, studying their faces and their contours.

Like Jesus seeing the demons in Copernaum and the demons recognizing him, once we can be still enough to really see our demons and let them get close, they lose some of their fearsome power over us. They become like creatures, like little daimons, almost like rowdy pets who are difficult to train. We are responsible for tending them and also for practicing, over and over again, how to stay with ourselves and hold boundaries with them when they are activated. And when we inevitably fail, and our demons take over, we are responsible for practicing unblending from them, meeting them with love and compassion and firmness, repairing with the people we may have hurt, and reclaiming our leadership of that unruly gaggle.

But we can't always, or even often, do that alone.

Sometimes we need Jesus' hands to remind us of our worth, our belovedness. Jesus' hands may appear in reassurances from friends or community members, in leaning our back against the strength of a tree. We may feel them in the exhale after we've been brave enough to repair with someone we've hurt or been hurt by. We may feel them from the glow of sunshine on our faces after so many weeks of clouds. We may receive Jesus' hands by closing our eyes, sensing the nearness of a Love that is bigger and deeper than we can imagine, and that holds us close even when we are possessed by anger or insecurity.

When we're feeling centered in the part of us that is sourced from divine love, we can see through other people's demons, too, to the centered and dignified self that they also are. Instead of taking their behavior personally, we can reach a loving hand to them in our own way.

This doesn't mean exposing ourselves to hurtful behavior over and over again when the people near to us are having trouble separating themselves from their demons. Boundaries are important. I love this part of the story, too – Jesus leaves Capernaum before everyone is healed! He gets some sweet sweet solitude in the mountains because loving people through their demons is hard work and every child of God sometimes needs a break. He leaves because he wants to continue spreading his message of revolutionary love all over the land.

And, I think, he leaves because he knows that people who are healing can help heal other people. He leaves because he knows that it is not just his hand that can reach out with love, see right through the demons and the fevers to people's essential selves, and help them up. He leaves because he knows we all have capacity to give that kind of dignifying, humanizing love to each other, and to receive it. And maybe he trusts that, like Simon's mother in law, once people are restored to themselves, they will give back from that wellspring of love and reach toward each other.

Jesus' aim wasn't just healing individual souls. He was born to overturn unjust power structures, to remind us of the authority of Love over Empire. Jesus' work with demons wasn't simply personal, and neither is ours. So many of our collective sins – mass incarceration is a prime example – are predicated on the mass demonization of whole groups of people. If we don't practice seeing and knowing the parts of ourselves that are capable of doing horrible things, we continue to live into a binary world in which “good” people get to be free and “bad” people spend their lives in cages. Our work to welcome the parts of ourselves and each other that we ostracize is essential to building the DNA of the culture of justice and wholeness that we know is possible.

I brought some show-and-tell today that just about sums it up. It's a magnet that belongs to my sweetie, Aram, and when he told me about it early in our relationship, it might have been the first time I knew I loved him. It says, “sometimes, I wrestle with my demons. And sometimes, we just snuggle.”

Life requires both, doesn't it? The wrestling and the snuggling. The boundaries and the compassion. The casting off and the recognition that some demons may be partners of ours for life. Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron puts it this way: "nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know."²

And so, this week, turn your face to this blessed sun we have waited for and let it remind you of your core, unshakeable belovedness, that the hand of unconditional love is always there to help you rise. Ask for a hug or reassurance from a friend. Place a hand on your heart. When you can, reach out your hands to other people who are in the grips of their own demons. Practice letting your demons get close enough for you to see them and know them, and for them to see you. Welcome them into your guest house. Wrestle with those rascals and set boundaries when you need to. And maybe, just maybe, thank them for what they're there to teach you, remind them they're not in charge, and then give them a little snuggle. Amen.



² From Pema Chodron's book *When Things Fall Apart*.