

Demons, Kudzu, And Clutter

Northminster Presbyterian Church: Ordinary 4, Year B (2012)

The lessons: First Corinthians 8¹⁻¹³; Mark 1²¹⁻²⁸

Our culture is full of demons: We have tons of them at Halloween; latest movie to star Daniel Radcliffe is about a demon terrorizing a town; prohibitionists railed against “demon rum”. We used to think of demons as malevolent fallen angels who wreak havoc and spread evil—think Gremlins, just nastier. In the late 19th and 20th centuries, the Social Gospel gained traction and we began thinking of demons in more institutional ways: Demons were those aspects of structural evil like alcoholism and poverty and physical abuse. See *The Gangs Of New York* if you want a vivid example. Today, we think of demons less like *Poltergeist* and *Amityville Horror*, and more like *The Shining*. Disturbed individuals who act out of agony and torment are thought to have their own demons; they are people who are possessed by something they can’t control. The peerless preacher Fred Craddock once said that we’ve renamed time and again what we think demons are, but we’ve not gotten much better at fighting them.

It might be easy to think that today’s lesson is about demons. It’s not, really. Today’s lesson is about Christ’s authority. So far in Mark’s Gospel, Christ has rebuffed Satan, has called a few disciples, and is now teaching in a synagogue. He teaches with what the Greek text labels *exousia*—“authority”. The word really means “out of one’s self”, and it’s not something the scribes and religious leaders had. The scribes were kind of like Presbyterian ministers: They could teach what the Scriptures say, but that’s about it. Christ went beyond that. He taught out of his person, out of who he was, out of his identity. Think of it this way: Suppose we held a class on John Grisham’s novels and we brought in the best John Grisham scholar, and she taught us all about the geographical context of Grisham’s works and his characterization and his plot devices and the recurring themes in his work. Now, imagine that we brought in Grisham himself. He could tell us all of those things, but he would add to them why he wrote those books and how. He would teach us out of his identity. He would teach us with *exousia*. Christ was teaching with *exousia*.

And enter an unclean spirit who tries to gain power over Christ by naming him. As we’ve mentioned before, names are incredibly important in the Holy Canon. Your name reflects who you are. Changing your name means you are changed, somehow, and the person who names you is advertising their power over you. This is why Abram gets changed to Abraham, and Simon to Peter, and Saul to Paul. This spirit is trying to gain power over Christ by using his name. But this demon may not be like the one that possessed Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, and it may not even be like fast cars and vodka martinis, which are James Bond’s personal demons. No, the Greek word that we have translated as unclean is *akathartos*, and it literally means “unpruned” or “overgrown”. The unclean spirit is whatever clutters and chokes our life. Here in the South, we would call it an unholy kudzu that takes over our life so that it is no longer our own.

Do you ever feel like your life is full of clutter? Raise your hand if you’ve ever had a day where you worked, worked, worked, worked like crazy all day long and at the end of the day you’re to-do list was longer than when you started. Yeah, me, too. Have you ever felt like you’re being pulled in ninety seven different directions? Do you ever

feel like you're held responsible for unreasonable expectations? Is your life cluttered? Is it no longer your own? I have an acquaintance who lives in DC who is impressively accomplished at what she does—she is dating a friend of mine. She is breathtakingly attractive, amazingly well-connected, fabulously wealthy, politically powerful, and depressingly miserable. Her life isn't her own. And it's not just that she answers to her superiors. It's that her way of life owns her now. The pace, the expectations, the image, network. Her life is cluttered. Overgrown.

That's where verse twenty five—the part about Christ's authority—really comes in. He tells the demon, the clutter, to shut up and get out. Hit the road, Jack, and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more. I bet you know what is overgrowing in your life, what is possessing you, what is contesting Christ for your life. I can certainly name my demon. This morning, Christian, I want you to know that Christ knows your name and claims you and drives out whatever is trying to possess your life. Christ prunes back whatever it is that is overtaking our lives and he gives us not calm, but peace; not happiness, but joy; not affection, but love. This week, when the kudzu of expectations and relationships and anxieties threatens to overgrow your life, cling to Christ, for he is the only one who can clear out the mess. He is the only one who can grant us peace. He is the only one worthy of our allegiance. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.