

Jeff's reflection – Jan 31, 2021

Imagine you are hosting a dinner party. Imagine you have the table set, and then one of your guests arrives...Jesus.

Jesus thanks you for the invitation, then looks at the table and says, "I wonder if we could just add a few leaves to the table – extend the table – because I have invited a few friends I met today. Actually – you know, I'm fairly decent at doing woodwork – maybe before everyone else arrives we could make a nice big round table – that way no one would sit at the 'head' of the table and we could see each other more easily."

So you help Jesus make the new table, and then Jesus' 'friends' begin to arrive – someone who he met while waiting in line to receive a bowl of soup from an outreach ministry, someone he met while they were huddled in a sleeping bag beneath an overpass, a woman he met standing on a street corner late one evening....

One of things about Jesus that disturbed, and still disturbs people, are his 'friends, and his habit of extending our tables to include his friends.

Today's scripture reading is that kind of disturbing story. Jesus is in the village Capernaum – a fishing village on the north shore of the sea of Galilee with a population of perhaps 1500 people, and a synagogue.

On the sabbath, Jesus, as a visiting rabbi – teacher – is invited to teach. We are told that people were astounded by his teaching, that he didn't seem to be just reciting laws and stories they knew, but there was something compelling about the way he taught. They said he taught as one with authority, as if what he said was being authored by God, as if what he said somehow seemed to be a deep part of who he was, of who everyone was.

Amongst the people who are listening to Jesus that day, is a man who is described as having "an unclean spirit."

Clean and unclean were familiar concepts in the world of Jesus. The Hebrew scriptures, particularly the book of Leviticus, provides extensive listings of which foods were considered clean and which unclean, which were acceptable and which were not. A person was normally considered to be clean, but would be considered unclean if they came in contact with a corpse, or could be made unclean due to bodily discharges or bleeding, or child-birth, or a person could be unclean if they had a severe skin rash, or psoriasis or what the Bible refers to as leprosy, which was likely a variety of skin disfigurements.

If a person became unclean it was their responsibility to return to cleanliness. They would have to undergo rituals of purification, involving ritual washings, offering an

animal sacrifice, being declared clean by a temple priest. An unclean person was not to have contact with what was holy; could not approach God until they had again been declared clean. To be unclean was to be separated from everyone else, to become someone to be avoided.

Today's scripture reading says that the man who approached Jesus was 'possessed by an unclean spirit.' We're not really told what that means – possessed – but I think that it implies that this person's life was now defined and shaped and directed by the spirit of unclean – by a pervasive attitude and societal spirit and designation. The world now defined this person as 'unclean.'

Today we may not designate people as clean or unclean but there are still societal attitudes that believe that there can be something about a person that makes him or her socially unacceptable, someone to be shunned, avoided.

Who are the ones who experience being unclean in our society? Last Thursday was Bell Let's Talk day, a day to break free from the silence and shunning that has too often been experienced by people living with mental health challenges. Gay, lesbian and transgender persons have historically experienced shunning from family and friends. People have been shamed because of age, body shape, physical appearance or capabilities. People have been treated as undesirables or objects because they are poor or indigenous, or black or female or...or...or....

So, Jesus is in the synagogue, and a man with an unclean spirit cries 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."

You are God's holy one – and the Holy and the unclean don't mix. So, what do you want Jesus? What do you have to do with the likes of me? Have you come to destroy us...because only when the spirit of unclean is destroyed can I be embraced by the Holy.

Jesus does not answer the question. Rather, Jesus speaks to the spirit of uncleanness and says, "Stop talking and come out of him."

The spirit convulses and cries and complains and comes out of the man. Spirits of divisiveness and fear don't leave quietly or easily.

Jesus lived in a culture unlike our North American culture of individualism. We tend to focus on discovering who we are as an individual, as a unique person, discovering and creating our unique identity. In Jesus' culture, identity was identity as part of a group – family, village, community. Who you were was who you were as part of that group.

When Jesus tells the spirit to come out, he is speaking not just to that individual, but to everyone present. Everyone must see the person differently. Everyone must be freed from the prevailing spirit, then...and now!

Brene Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston. She writes and speaks about shame, about vulnerability, and about courage and empathy. She says that shame separates us, disconnects us from others, and from ourselves. She says shame is not expelled by self-confidence, but by empathy. Since shame happens between people, it is healed between people, in relationships of understanding and compassion and affirmation.

Lisa Sharon Harper is an American author. In her early years at school she was made an object of bullying – bullying turns us into objects, targets –she experienced physical beatings from other students, as well as verbal shaming.

The shame became internalized – a spirit of unclean and unworthy that possessed her. Twenty years later she struggled at her work – she often felt threatened, attacked and she became very combative and defensive during staff meetings.

She went to a church conference. One of the rooms was designated for ‘healing prayer.’ She went into a usual small conference room, with some chairs with metal legs arranged in a circle. There were three older women there. Harper took sat in one chair. The woman who seemed to be the leader of the group, held Harper’s hands and said they were going to pray to Jesus to tell them what healing was needed. Harper said the woman thanked God for bringing her to this room and used words such as beautiful to describe her.

After several minutes, the leader asked if anyone had heard anything. One of the others said she was aware of a deep pain that needed healing. The leader said that Jesus had told her that Harper was living with a posted-note on her forehead. Written on that note was the word ‘unwanted.’

Harper began to cry. She realized that she had been living most of her life held by the lie that she was unwanted, that she was fundamentally unloved. They prayed again, and Harper visualized Jesus removing the note from her forehead, and replacing it with one that said, ‘wanted’. Now she began not only to cry, but to giggle, and to suddenly feel that the spirit of unwanted had left her.

“Be quiet,” says Jesus to the unclean spirit. Stop speaking your lie of being unloved, of being unlovable, of being flawed. “Come out” you spirit that shames and separates us from each other and from who we are as one loved by God.

The man with the unclean spirit recognized that Jesus was the Holy One of God. Jesus revealed to that man that he was also a Holy One of God, that each of us is a Holy One of God, that we exist because God wanted and wants each of us, and that Jesus calls each of us friend, and assures us that there is always a place for us at Christ’s table,

always a home for us in the heart of God. AMEN

For reflection:

What spirits of 'unclean' exist in our world?

When have you heard of or experienced those unclean spirits being told to be quiet and to leave?

When has someone affirmed that you are 'wanted'?

What are ways we can practice affirming that everyone is wanted?