

How Does Faith Help Us to Be Unflinching?

Beloved friends, welcome to this fourth Sunday in Epiphany (a season of illumination) and this day of our first Annual Meeting as St. Croix United Church. In today's reading from the gospel of Mark, Jesus encounters a person who has been long tormented by an unclean spirit. As we ponder the powerful authority with which Jesus confronts the unclean spirit, we are invited to wonder this: How does faith help us to be unflinching? Let's begin this time of reflection with a moment of prayer: God of all creation, grant us listening ears and wisdom to discern the unclean and clean spirits in our midst, affecting our lives. Amen.

Let's wonder together this morning about unflinching, faith-based authority and about unclean or evil spirits. We have just heard it said about Jesus in the gospel of Mark that *"The people were spellbound by the teaching, because Jesus taught with an authority that was unlike their religious scholars."* We do well to note that Jesus did not teach in opposition to the religious scholars of that local synagogue. Neither does the writer say that Jesus taught in a way that was better than their religious scholars. No, listening carefully, we hear, *"He taught with an authority that was unlike their religious scholars."* What was that authority that radiated outward from Jesus?

Rev. Kate Huey, former Dean of the Amistad Chapel at our UCC national offices has written this: *"The word 'authority,' of course, has more than one meaning. Even a corrupt judge or police officer has "authority," but the simplest, poorest person in the world can speak with a different kind of authority if they embody wisdom and integrity that others find compelling. Each one holds a different kind of power, one from the outside, and the other from within."* (<https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/weekly-seeds-with-authority/>)

Let's unpack Huey's thought. **Authority from the outside** is about having power over. **Authority from within** is about having the power to do and be with integrity. When exercised, one's authority from within can empower others to locate their own authority from within. *"[T]he simplest, poorest person in the world can speak with a different kind of authority,"* she writes, *"if they embody wisdom and integrity that others find compelling."* Jesus ministered with authority from within – with the courage of his convictions. He arrived to every interaction with measures of purpose and determination to shake up the status quo, which were equaled only by the measures of his openness and love toward the other. No wonder those around him were spellbound!

And then this happened: *"Suddenly a person with an unclean spirit appeared in their synagogue. It (the unclean spirit) shrieked, 'What do you want from us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!'"* Indeed, Jesus did come into the world to destroy unclean spirits! So let's explore what unclean spirits are and what they are not.

Unclean spirits are not aspects of our identity (that is, aspects of how we have been formed – each a unique manifestation of the image of God). Left- or right-handedness, shorter or taller physical stature, darker or lighter skin pigment are not the work of unclean spirits. Neither assertiveness nor meekness comes from unclean spirits. Neither homosexuality nor gender fluidity comes from an unclean spirit.

Difficult, challenging, painful experiences are also not caused by unclean spirits. No physical, cognitive, or emotional disability; no illness, disorder, or genetic condition is caused by an unclean spirit. Neither depression nor cancer nor autism is caused by an unclean spirit.

Do we need to call on all the supportive power from within ourselves and others as we manage physical cognitive, and emotional disabilities, illnesses and disorders? Absolutely! Are those phenomena caused by unclean spirits? No.

Unclean spirits carry with them the authority of power over, the authority of evil – that is, power that attaches itself to our hearts with the purpose of pushing us down, sucking the faith out of us, and filling us with fear of others or self. We have all experienced unclean or evil spirits in collectively supported disempowering messages.

Sexism is an unclean spirit. It works to convince us that we must look like images of people projected on screens by media. Here is a statistic from recent years: Between one third and one half of teenagers use unhealthy weight control behaviors such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, vaping, vomiting, and taking laxatives. Clearly, sexism is an evil spirit.

Consumerism is an unclean spirit. It works to convince us that our self-worth is based on trendiness of our possessions, pushing us toward setting our hearts on having and getting more. And we fill the Earth with more unnatural stuff at an unsustainable rate as the Earth groans. Clearly, consumerism is an evil spirit.

So many unclean spirits threaten our faith on a daily basis. Our reserves of love and our authority from within can feel dried up by these spirits.

I invite you to wonder with me this morning (and to share aloud if so moved): What unclean spirits – what disempowering messages – do we hear in the spaces in which we move?

I hear: You are broken.

I hear: People don't care.

I hear: You are alone in this.

What unclean spirit or disempowering message do you hear? I welcome you to share aloud now, within the welcome of community, if you are moved to speak one of those unclean, disempowering messages. *[pause for sharing]*

In a few moments, we will shift to the question of what empowering messages we hear.

As a way of transitioning from recognition of unclean spirits in our midst to the calling we have to share empowering messages, I want to share lyrics from singer songwriter Shawn Mullins. While not an intentionally religious song, the 1990s song called "Shimmer" speaks to how people are born to love but will be taught to hate. The first portion we hear is about birth and the second portion is about the desire to shake the demon or unclean spirit of hate. Mullins writes,

*"Sharing with us what he knows
Shining eyes are big and blue
And all around him water flows
This world to him is new
This world to him is new
To touch a face
To kiss a smile
New eyes see no race
The essence of a child
The essence
He's born to shimmer, he's born to shine
He's born to radiate*

*He's born to live, he's born to love
But we'll teach him how to hate"*

Mullins' striking song on this strong, hopeful note – he writes:

*"But time I cannot change
So here's to looking back
You know I drink a whole bottle of my pride
And I toast to change to keep these demons off my back
Just get these demons off my back
'Cause I want to shimmer, I want to shine
I want to radiate
I want to live, I want to love
I want to try to learn not to hate
Try not to hate
We're born to shimmer, we're born to shine
We're born to radiate
We're born to live, we're born to love
We're born to never hate"*

I wonder: With Shawn, will we swallow our unhealthy pride (our invulnerability, our idea that we are not the one who needs to change) and instead toast to change and pursue needed change in order to keep the demons off our backs?

Each of us knows what unclean spirit, demon, evil, authority-over message has the greatest power over us. I hope that, when we go out from this time and space of worship, we will go with determination to shimmer, shine, and radiate God's love wherever we go and in whatever we do.

How can we make that shift toward trusting clean spirits – messages from heart of God's love that guide us toward our power from within?

Let's return to the gospel reading for a clue. When I ask us this morning to wonder how faith can help us to be unflinching, I am building on how transfixed I am and the crowd in Jesus' time was by his steady, confident, bearing. We heard, *"Jesus rebuked the spirit sharply: 'Be quiet! Come out of that person!' At that the unclean spirit convulsed the possessed one violently, and with a loud shriek it came out."*

Biblical scholar Ofelia Ortega writes of authority as divine power: *"People are amazed, and even perplexed (v. 27) in the face of this authority power. God is present and acts in the world through the teaching and through the word that provides healing. What is this? A new doctrine, set forth with authority (v. 27)! Amid so many voices, one voice finally resounds. There are so many words, but that one is the expected word. Novelty is in the fact that it is a word that produces healing actions. That word liberates the Earth from the forces of evil and makes our world habitable for the human being; that word guides the church to create spaces of freedom and places of healing and communion."* (*Feasting on the Word*). Words from Ofelia Ortega.

That divine authority of which Ortega writes and which Jesus embodied is also available to and through us. Jesus knew that neighbors had likely caused the person with the unclean spirit to feel as though they themselves were unclean – that the condition they lived with defined their personhood. If that were the case, such an unclean spirit carried by those neighbors would be identified and referred to as ableism and prejudice in our society today.

Jesus' faith in a loving God caused him to be able to see the whole person. Jesus spoke to the unclean spirit (the torturous condition afflicting the person) and said, *"Come out of that person!"* Jesus shared in its place a clean spirit – a message from the heart of God's love – that the person was

whole, beloved, and capable even as he coped with a very challenging condition.

So I invite you to wonder with me this morning (and to share aloud if you're moved): What clean spirits – what empowering messages from the heart of God's love – do we hear in the spaces in which we move, among the people whom we call community?

I hear: You are whole.

I hear: You are beloved.

I hear: You are capable.

I hear: We are in this together.

Are there any clean spirits, any empowering messages from the heart of God's love that you hear in these days and that you would like to raise aloud? [*"You are welcome" – we sung together.*]

As we continue in this season of Epiphany (illumination) and as we particularly pray for holy illumination in the context of our Annual Meeting today, may we continue to ask ourselves these questions: How does Jesus coming into the world as an embodiment of God's presence, transform me? And how can I become ever more open to the empowering authority of God's love within my life?

In closing, I invite us to hear words from the Psalmist as a blessing for our individual and collective journeys. We heard them earlier. I invite you to be in a position of rest, closing your eyes if you wish, holding your hands open to the Spirit. We heard:

"Wondrous is Creation, Great Builder; I take pleasure in pondering your Work.

Full of honor and integrity are your teachings; those who follow them will find new life.

Your steadfast Love is food for the soul, nourishment in times of fear.

You are ever mindful of your covenant, a very Presence to the weary and afflicted.

You bring new life to the world; Yes! life in abundance is your gift to us.”

Each of us is whole, beloved, capable, welcome. And we are stronger together. May we carry clean messages from the heart of God’s love to all persons with whom we intersect, open to receiving those same loving messages in return – because Love is counting on each of us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
January 28, 2024 (4th Sunday after Epiphany, Annual Meeting)
Psalm 111, Mark 1:21-28