

Then what?

Because the gospels so often paint such vivid scenes with spare details, Christians for centuries have taken license to fill in the gaps, however faithfully or fancifully, adding color and resolution, in words and music and visual art, to Scripture's tersely told tales of Jesus.

Today's gospel is one such story, easy to imagine, but narrated so quickly that it leaves the reader wanting more.

Specifically, what next?

What became of the fascinating main character?

What happened to the unclean spirit?

Did it go on a speaking tour?

Did it write a tell-all book and promote it on the talk show circuit?

Did it resist the public limelight, declining interviews until interest faded and it could live again in anonymous, peaceful obscurity?

Did it reappear on a reality show or use its eloquent voice to sell amazing kitchen gadgets and cutting edge exercise equipment on early morning infomercials?

Did it simply leave town for a few days, wait for Jesus to move on, and then move back in?

Did it look hard in the mirror to assess its personal strengths, realize that it was a solid theologian, and then enroll in seminary to become a pastor?

However likely or unlikely any of these scenarios might seem, they are all possible because of the way that Jesus answered its questions.

What you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?

Have you come to destroy us?

Knowing who Jesus is, the unclean spirit probably doesn't only expect so.

It hopes so.

This unclean spirit does its job to the very end, struggling for power against this newly unleashed force for good, not only by naming him in public, and unmasking his real identity before a crowd too amazed to catch it, but also by tempting Jesus, luring him with the power of suggestion toward the trap of violent confrontation.

If Jesus destroys this spirit, he wins the battle but loses the war, because then he plays the spirit's game.

The unclean spirit does violence to the man it occupies, not only physically but socially.

The convulsions are nothing compared to the expulsions, the regular rejections from other people that come with this spirit's stigma.

One unclean spirit spoils the whole apple barrel, so just by showing up, this man has defiled the sacred synagogue and all the righteous people in it.

Priest and spiritual writer John Shea explains,

People could become defiled by contact with an unclean spirit....

The scribal advice was avoidance.

The people and individuals were holy to the degree that they kept their distance from what was unholy....

Therefore the scribal teaching without authority was: "Steer clear!"

(Shea, John. Eating with the Bridegroom. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 48-49.)

That "approach," of course, does great social violence to the man who is now denied access to public places and the basic blessing of human touch.

The unclean spirit is more than happy to leverage religious fears and good intentions to fracture human community; it's a timeworn and reliably effective technique that evil forces have used long before and since.

It is, I believe, at the heart of why so many good, faithful people in our tradition are so worried about welcoming people who are transgender or lesbian or gay, people identified by pre-scientific religious definitions as having an unclean sexuality.

We are heirs to long cultivated fears that unholiness is a contagious STD, a socially transmitted disease, which is best handled with caution and quarantine.

This, Jesus would say, gives evil too much credit, and too much power.

He comes with a *new teaching--with authority*, a teaching that is unafraid to stand up to the social subterfuge of the unclean spirit, call it out, and then send it out.

Jesus believes and he demonstrates that, in the title words from Desmond Tutu's contribution to our hymnal, *Goodness is Stronger than Evil*. (ELW #721)

Tutu would know, after all the evil he endured as he confronted and helped to banish his nation's unclean spirit, named apartheid.

Tutu and his allies refused to play that spirit's violent game, losing several battles but winning the war by changing the rules, shifting the ground to truth and respect, justice and mercy and tough-minded peace.

He acted as if one good apple can ripen the whole rotten barrel--a strange and powerful *new teaching* he learned in the Capernaum synagogue from Jesus of Nazareth.

Following Jesus, Tutu named the unclean spirit that tried to name him, and then he worked to cast it out, destroying its grip on people without destroying the people themselves, indeed, doing so in order to save the people.

That is the Jesus enterprise, the agenda of the kingdom of heaven which draws near to us, not only to rescue us from all that works violence and separation in our lives but also to recruit us in the liberation effort for the wholeness and wellbeing of others.

In a world that is quick to demonize, Jesus calls us to humanize.

That is why we continue to read and post our affirmation of welcome statement--because the world and the church and the victims of their violent rejection continue to need to hear truth that challenges and changes fear and opens the doors of God's house and the depths of God's heart to everyone.

Evil will fight back.

It will shout haunting questions and even correct theology in its desperate efforts to retain its power and to keep us politely segregated, nervously careful, and piously compliant and complicit with its destructive purposes.

Too often we do and we will succumb to its seductive influence.

But Jesus comes, and comes and comes again, undaunted, in broken bread and spilled wine and authoritative word to banish its lies with the sturdy truth of God's tender embrace.

The unclean spirit and its friends will come again and again too, reappearing often in Mark's gospel, battling, belittling, demonizing and dehumanizing, attacking Jesus from every angle until finally the lynch mob gets him, and Jesus' own spirit is expelled on a dark Friday afternoon when it is obvious once again that evil stronger than good.

Then what?

Where did Jesus' beautiful, banished spirit go?

Let's just say that now we are part of the speaking tour.