

TEXT: Mark 1:21-28 They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried 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.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

IN A CONVERSATION last week, Karen Heather told me about watching the prayer service attended by President Obama and members of the new administration, at the Washington National Cathedral on January 21. She particularly loved the story that Preacher Sharon E. Watkins told, a Native American story in which a grandson came to his grandfather with anger on his face. Grandfather said, "Come, sit, tell me what has happened today." "I went to the town today with Father," the boy began anger fading to tears. "He was going to trade the furs he has collected. I was excited to go, because father said that since I had helped him with the trapping, I could get something for me.... I looked at many things and finally found a metal knife. It was small, but good size for me, so father got it for me."

Without lifting his head, the boy continued, "I went outside to wait for Father, and to admire my new knife in the sunlight. Some town boys came by and saw me. They called me dirty and stupid and said that I should not have such a fine knife. The largest of these boys pushed me back and I fell over one of the other boys. I dropped my knife and one of them snatched it up and they all ran away laughing." Here, the boy's anger returned, "I hate them. I hate them all!"

Lifting his grandson's face so his eyes looked into the boy's, Grandfather said, "I too, at times, have felt a great hate for those that have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. I have struggled with these feelings many times. It is as if there are two wolves inside me, one is white and one is dark. The White Wolf is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and does not take offense when no offense was intended. It will only fight when it is right to do so, and the right way. This wolf knows compassion, faithfulness, hope, truth, and love. But the Dark Wolf is full of anger. The littlest thing will set him into a fit of temper. He is vengeful, full of resentments, and self-pity, and fear . . . He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing. Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit."

The boy looked intently into Grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?" Grandfather smiled and said, "The one I feed."

Now, while Karen was telling the story, I was feeling a little uncomfortable, then positively annoyed, probably jealous. You see, I have used that story several times over the years, and even posted in on the bulletin board a few times. Why wouldn't Karen remember the story when I told it????

Well, it took me a minute to realize that I was already feeding the dark wolf within me, the wolf of resentment and anger. Luckily before I could get too deep in this dinner party, (CDF) another in the circle came to my rescue "Well I do believe I've heard that story before, in a sermon right here!" I felt vindicated! But not so vindicated that I was not alarmed at how quickly I had begun to feed the wrong wolf. Later, as I pondered and then prayed about it, I prayed for wisdom to find the wolf of wonder, and generosity. I really want to feed the wolf who has the ability to be happy in the joy of someone's discovery, in the pleasure of the preacher's success.

We all have these wolves within us, these urges to be selfish and angry and self righteous, as well as to be giving and patient and open and benevolent. The trick is to feed one and starve the other. And I think that is what the scripture is saying. Jesus is the authority. Jesus can help you feed the white wolf and starve the dark wolf. Trust Jesus.

Mark illustrates this truth with the story of Jesus exorcising an evil spirit from a person in the synagogue congregation. It would have been normative for Jesus, an itinerant rabbi, to teach in the synagogue. The surprise was how amazed people were at the authority by which he taught. Mark doesn't actually tell us what Jesus taught. He has already told us that Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kin-dom of God, but Mark isn't really interested in the details of what Jesus taught. Instead, Mark wants us to remember who Jesus is. He doesn't want us to think of Jesus just as a teacher, though he obviously was an excellent teacher. Mark wants us to know that Jesus taught with the authority of God, because he was God. For Mark, it was not as important what Jesus said as what Jesus did. He did what the man could not do for himself, he restored him to sanity. Jesus commanded the dark wolf to leave.

We all have multiple wolves inside – Some are everyday garden variety demons like resentment or fear or hatred or desire for vengeance or self-loathing or judgmentalism or the need to control. One of the strongest is the demon "Yesbut".

We say we want healing, but often, when it comes to the point we say "yes, but..."

"Yes, but he really isn't sorry, so how can I forgive him?"

"Yes, but I almost died - why shouldn't I be afraid?"

"Yes, but I've studied/worked so hard, and done so well, I've got every right to think I'm better than those who don't even try."

" Yes, but he's my only child, of course I want to keep him with me."

" Yes, but, she's made a mess of her life, why should I help her?"

Yesbut is a wicked demon we feed & nurture until eventually it becomes such a part of who we are we cannot imagine living without it - and we figure out all kinds of ways to justify his place in our lives. When confronted with the immense love of God that Christ brings to us,

Yesbut cries out “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” And the answer is YES!

Then there is an even more devious demon, the demon Yur (as in you are). Yur comes into being through the words of others. Someone else labeling us “worthless”, “stupid”, “useless”. “not worth loving”, beliefs which come from: tragedy, disappointment, hardship, betrayal, abuse... When confronted with the immense love of God that Christ brings to us, Yur cries out “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” And the answer is YES!

And then there’s perhaps an even more powerful demon Ism: racism, classism, ageism, sexism, heterosexism. This insidious demon not only plagues individuals but whole social systems, enabling whole groups of people to crush the hopes and dreams of others. When confronted with the immense love of God that Christ brings to us, Ism cries out “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” And the answer is YES!

It’s awfully hard to conquer Yesbut or Yur or Ism on our own, and fortunately, we don’t have to. We only have to lean into our faith and call on the great gifts that Christ brings us: the love and the forgiveness, the strength and the compassion that is not only at the core of Christianity, but woven through and through our faith. Love and forgiveness, strength and compassion -- it’s how Jesus lived, it is why he died, and it is what he died for.

Through the authority of Jesus, The arrogant can find humility, the fearful can be made strong, the resentful can find compassion, the despised can find value, the scorned can find love, and the systems of oppression can be overturned and destroyed.

Jesus’ ministry of healing reflects God’s desire for human beings to be made whole, and to live in loving, integrated, wholesome relationships -- which is another way to talk about baptism and communion. Both baptism and communion lead us into a relationship with Jesus, one based on trust in his wisdom and authority, but also in his ultimate love and deep abiding interest in our highest good, in our ability to be truly happy, joyous and free. Both baptism and communion lead us into relationship with each other, For the one who heals all our broken and sin-sick souls is the one who gathers us in and sends us out, the one who welcomes us to this table and feeds us the one who greets us as beloved, the one who speaks for God. And we are all amazed. And we are all healed. And we are all blessed. Amen