

“Asking Jesus to Leave”
Mark 5:1-20
Sermon series: “Who Do You Say That I Am?”
Today’s answer: Jesus, the exorcist

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Some of you, I suspect, are familiar
with C.S. Lewis’s delightful work, *The Screwtape Letters*.

It’s a book where Lewis imagines a world in which an experienced devil
is writing letters to his nephew, a novice devil.

The experienced devil is named Screwtape, and the novice devil is
Wormwood.

Screwtape provides all sorts of counsel to his nephew about the best ways to
lead an individual away from the “Enemy,”—that is, away from God.

At one point early on, Screwtape writes to his nephew:

“The fact that ‘devils’ are predominantly comic figures in the modern
imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise
in his mind [that is, in the mind of the person whom Wormwood is trying woo]
suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he
cannot believe in that [a demon with red tights]...he therefore cannot believe in
you.”¹

It’s all imaginary—Screwtape, Wormwood, the person whom Wormwood is
“working on” to try to keep him away from God...all part of the marvelous
imagination that C.S. Lewis possessed.

Is it all imaginary?
What do you think?
What about that part about demons convincing us that they do not exist?

Do we believe in demons?
I don’t believe in demons—at least, I don’t THINK I believe in demons...

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1961.

In the movie “The Same Kind of Different as Me,”
the story is told of a wealthy married couple, Ron and Deborah Hall.

It’s based on a true story, by a book of the same title.

Ron and Deborah have grown apart, and their marriage is on the rocks.
So Deborah decides to start volunteering at a soup kitchen in Ft. Worth.

She talks her husband into joining her,
with the hope that by loving the poor and neglected in their city,
they might rediscover their own love for one another.

In the soup kitchen, they meet a menacing man wielding a baseball bat
named Denver Moore. This guy looks like HE had—to use Mark’s words—an
unclean spirit.

Denver does not have a home.
He’s lived a hard, painful, and dangerous life.
But Deborah is not deterred by Denver’s outward appearances, and she tries
to win over his trust.

Long-story short, the Halls help transform the soup kitchen.
And a friendship develops between Denver and the Halls.

There’s a scene in the film in which Ron takes Denver to the country club at
which the Halls are members.

They watch Ron’s daughter play tennis, then they go inside to the restroom
to wash up.

Another member of the club approaches Ron Hall at the sink, believing that
Ron is alone.

He says to Ron, “I think it’s amazing what you guys have done over at the
Mission. I do wonder though if maybe you aren’t taking things a bit too far.”

“I don’t follow,” Ron replies.

“Listen, buddy, you want to host a benefit, I’ll be the first one to write a check. But we come here to get away from the world for a while. I’m not sure what good it is to remind us how fortunate we are over lunch.”

“You’re talking about my friend Denver, right?”

“Look...I like you, Ron, and I like your wife, but many of us here have a problem with you bringing him around.”

At that moment, Denver opens the door to one of the stalls and walks up. Denver has heard every word.

So Ron points toward Denver, and tells his friend from the club that Denver is standing behind him, he can tell Denver himself.

The man gets miffed, he leaves, and a big smile crosses Denver’s face.

“You got my back!” he says to Ron.

Now that’s a nice scene in the movie.
Ron Hall sticking up for his new friend, Denver.

I wonder how the Gospel writer Mark would interpret that scene.
Would Mark say that Ron Hall was sticking up for a friend?
Or would Mark say that Ron Hall was **STANDING UP?**

Standing up to something **DEMONIC...**

Do you believe in demons?
I don’t know if I believe in demons.

But I know the Gospel writer Mark sure does.
Three times in the first chapter of Mark, Jesus is busy casting out demons.

Then in chapter 3, Jesus is accused by his opponents of being possessed by a demon.

And now we arrive at chapter 5, in which Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit—the man goes from howling among the tombs to sitting before Jesus, “clothed and in his right mind.”

The most curious part of this story, however, is not the demon—or demons—that Jesus exorcises from the man.

It is the response of those who knew the man.
Did you catch their response?

Upon seeing the man—
no longer possessed by a demon,
his neighbors do not celebrate.

They get scared.
And then they ask—beg—Jesus to leave.

Why would they want Jesus to leave?

Mark does not tell us, but I’d like to offer a theory.
You can decide at the end of this sermon what you think of this theory.
My theory is this:

The neighbors were comfortable with the demon belonging to that man.
To someone else.
And then Jesus changed all that.
And the neighborhood did not want that.
They did not want changes to the status quo.

That’s my theory, because that’s what happens when demons are destroyed.
It changes the status quo...

And if Jesus changes the status quo in that man’s life, what might he do with THEIR lives?

Is it possible that Jesus might find something in their lives that he wants to alter, that he wants to get rid of, some demon they don’t even know is there?

Is it possible that Jesus might want to overturn THEIR status quo?

There's something in all of us that resists looking closely at our status quos, that resists changing the status quo...

In her groundbreaking book, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander makes the argument that “a system of legal discrimination and segregation [has] been born again in this country because of the war on drugs and mass incarceration.”²

One of the fascinating things about Alexander's book—
which came out almost 10 years ago—
is the way she opened her argument.

“I reached the conclusions presented in this book reluctantly,” she begins.

“Ten years ago, I would have argued strenuously against the central claim made here—namely, that something akin to a racial caste system currently exists in the United States.”³

In other words, a little over a decade ago, Alexander could not see the deeply embedded problems with the incarceration of so many African-Americans that has become the status quo in our society.

But she goes on to make her argument in many ways, with many stories and citing many statistics.

She writes:

“The racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid.”⁴

Do you believe in demons?

² Michelle Alexander, “The Newest Jim Crow,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 2018.

³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, revised edition, New York: The New Press, 2010, 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

I don't *think* I believe in demons—actual creatures,
 haunting our world...
but I DO believe in the DEMONIC.

I do believe that there are forces that seem to capture us,
 and keep us ALL enslaved, chained,
 to particular ways of living in our world,
 ways that are ANATHEMA to the will and way of God.

It doesn't just happen at a COMMUNAL level.
 It can also happen at a **personal** level.

Have you ever had to confront a demon in your own life?
 And you didn't want to do it?

The late Jim Nelson was a professor of Christian Ethics at United
 Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

He was also a recovering alcoholic.

In his book *Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience*, Nelson wrote:

“While still drinking I persuaded more than one therapist that we should not be talking about my problems with alcohol...I was really convinced that if we dealt successfully with the ‘fundamental’ problem (my childhood family issues) then secondary problems (like alcohol use) would evaporate. Finally I encountered a therapist who would not listen to my theory and instead insisted that we begin with my *primary* disease—alcoholism—and leave other issues until later. That approach did not please me one bit, but it was exactly what I needed.”⁵

I don't believe in demons—not in actual creatures, created by God, but fallen to haunt us here on earth—but I do believe in demons.

We all have our demons, right?

⁵ James B. Nelson, *Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Think for a moment:

Is there any part of your life that tends to control you?
 Any part of your life that you're too scared to change on your own?
 Or you've tried to change it, over and over again you've tried, but you don't know how...

We all have our demons...

The desire to work hard can become the demon of perfectionism or STATUS.

The desire for a comfortable life can become the demon of greed.
 The well-intentioned desire to help other people can become the demon of thinking you and I can save other people.

The desire to express your hurt and anger can become the demon of verbal abuse or the crime of physical abuse.

The desire for intimacy can become the demon of promiscuity.
 The desire to help your child can become the demon of always trying to control your child.

The desire to prove you're right can become the demon of bitterness, holding that grudge so tightly—you are never truly free.

I don't know what demons you may battle in your own life.
 I do know this.

According to Mark, God has power over the demonic.
 How do the demons respond to Jesus in our text?
 Not by saying: we're gonna get you, Jesus!
 They respond by begging Jesus—asking permission to enter the swine!

According to Mark, God has power over the demonic.
 According to Mark, the God who comes to us in Jesus can change anything!

That's a scary proposition when we like things just the way they are.
When we are wed to the status quo.

But it's powerful good news if you know, deep down, that there's some part of you that needs changing, that needs the healing and holy touch of God.

I recall a story Tex Sample once told.
The story wasn't about Tex, it was about a friend of Tex Sample's...Jimmy Hope Smith.

Now the first thing you need to know about Jimmy Hope Smith is that he had a thick accent. He grew up in Alabama, and he retained his Alabama accent for his entire life. And when he spoke with that thick Alabama accent, he also spoke very slowly.

The second thing you need to know about Jimmy Hope is that he was smart.

Like really, REALLY smart.

One of the things Jimmy Hope was really smart about was aesthetics.
He studied aesthetics a whole lot.

He knew Kant. He knew Heidegger.
He knew them all...and what he enjoyed doing was going to a party and talking about art.

And because of his very slow speech, and his very thick accent (which he would sometimes exaggerate intentionally at these parties), there would sometimes be people at a party who thought Jimmy Hope wasn't that smart.

They had a preconceived idea of what smart was supposed to sound like.
And some of those people at the parties would try to make Jimmy Hope look bad.

Tex Sample said that trying to make Jimmy Hope Smith look bad about art—was kind of like the experience of trying to kiss a rattlesnake.

But I don't want you to think of snakes when you think of Jimmy Hope Smith.

I want you to think about the time when Jimmy Hope and Tex Sample were at a church conference. And the conference got done about nine, ten o'clock at night, and they headed back to the motel, along with five or six other folk.

And they found themselves in a motel room—
 one of those tiny, constricted motel rooms—
 just shootin' the breeze, with Sample sitting on the bed,
 Jimmy Hope sitting on the bed,
 and someone they didn't know was in between them.

Before too long, they realized that the man sitting in between them was talking about something very, very close. They realized it was something they were not prepared to know.

The man began to talk about his wife's suicide.
 How one day when he was away, she had laid down under their bed,
 face up, and took the drugs.

He looked all over the house before he found her.

Then he went into one of the most AGONIZING conversations anyone had ever heard. About how he felt responsible for his wife's death...even though, by any reasonable estimate, she had suffered from the kind of chronic depression that all his care and compassion could NEVER have rescued her from...

***His GUILT, his FEAR...it was POSSESSING HIM...
 like a demon.***

Jimmy Hope was sitting to this man's right.

"I want to tell you somethin'. I'm ordained. And by the power of Christ, I have the authority to forgive sins—real, and *imagined*...

Then Jimmy Hope drew the sign of the Cross on that man's chest.

“I want you to know that from this day forward, you are HEALED.

You are healed of everything you ever did to your wife.
And you are free of everything you ever IMAGINED
you did to your wife.

You are a FREE MAN...”⁶

Sample says that he heard from that man three years later.
His life had utterly turned around.

He was a new person.
He was a free person.

He was someone who knew the power of Christ really could change
anything...

Friends, the good news today is that the same Jesus who healed that man,
and the same Jesus who healed the demoniac long ago...that very same Jesus is
here, with us, in this room today.

And the people he wants to set free...are me,
and YOU.

Amen.

⁶ Tex Sample told this story at the Festival of Homiletics in Nashville, Tennessee, April, 1999.