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Power to do: Casting out demons

Susan Adams

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Mark 1:21-28

I have quite a lot to say today about unclean spirits and 'casting out demons'.
(Much to my surprise!)

I want to say on the one hand we can all do it, cast them out that is, and on the other I do not believe there are supernatural negative (or positive for that matter) beings that invade our bodies and cause us to be ill either in body or in mind, or to make us behave in socially unacceptable ways.

But I know there are a lot of people who do believe just this still today. I am also aware that for many years the early church was deeply convinced of it. I am also aware that by whatever name you call them there are dynamics in persons and communities that are in need, of naming and calling out; of healing.

One of the fundamental errors in interpreting the stories of healing, such as we heard read this morning, as the 'positive power of Jesus over coming, or being stronger than the destructive power of the 'unclean spirit'' in a specific individual body, is, as many scholars would say, to misconstrue the genre of the story.

In other words these healing stories, of which there is quite a collection in Mark, are about the health of the community rather than the health (mental or physical) of an individual.

The human body is a symbol in this sense for the body of society; the body politic. While this approach appeals to me, and seems to resonate with the First Testament readings we have been hearing, I do not want to be too quick to dismiss the individual's place in the healing of communities.

Individual and community seem to be the two sides of the one coin.

Each of us can individually be 'possessed' of demons. One of mine is my desire to have everything perfect, and prepared well ahead of time. This can be a perseveration that narrows my focus into tasks and away from taking account of feelings! [What are yours?]

It is also common for people to look at other people and see them as the cause of this problem or that, and to 'demonise' them; to blame them for what has gone wrong. We do that with people from cultures we do not understand or whose sexualities are different from ours. Women priests were 'demonised' for some years as responsible for the decreasing numbers of people in church.

Sometime we can readily see that the young woman raped as a child and now suffering with a personality disorder and an inability to form relationships may have her 'demon' living in her street. And the young people that terrorise communities

with violence, may be for us the face of the demon that is abroad as drugs, addiction and greed.

In these instances we easily see the relationship between the individual and the community. For if the individual is to be healed the community must face, name and overcome the destructive powers of poverty, greed and the misuse of power.

But this is to put it simply.

There are other more complex and layered situations. We know today with our advanced medical science that there are some physical conditions that are diseases and affect the body. Dominic Crossanⁱ (1994:81) suggests that the way we respond to such conditions, AIDS for example, makes them into an 'illness' as well as a disease. 'Illness', he suggests, is socially constructed. Similarly, we can do the same thing with clinical depression or other conditions that require support from medication. In these situations what is required by the community is not to judge or blame but to hold the affected people without judgement within a network of love and support. While the disease may not be healed the illness surely can.

And this is what Jesus is doing, redefining illness - or the boundaries of social inclusion.

So it is the community's attitude that will need to be confronted by a power greater than it; it is in need of a change of heart, and the 'illness' which is defined as, such by society as a mechanism for keeping its boundaries clear and controllable, needs normalising.

In Jesus' day, to be considered possessed by 'unclean spirits' meant you were unable to participate in the ritual life of the community. You were outside the norm. So it also meant an inability to participate in the social life as well: social isolation. I am not sure we are much different today! We still exclude people.

Jesus redefines the boundary of who is acceptable and who is not: of who is ill and who is not. We are told he does this with authority in the synagogue. It is clear from the collection of stories in this early chapter of Mark that the writer is working very hard to establish for the early church a persuasive argument regarding the significance and power of Jesus. We should remember Israelites were a small nation under Roman occupation so needed to be very clear about boundaries and leadership authority. Jesus is challenging both these!

The 'unclean spirit' should have prevented the man from even being in the synagogue! But he was, and he shouted out that he knew that Jesus was 'the Holy One of God'. Two major challenges to the leadership! By refusing to recognise the 'unclean spirit', the illness, Jesus is refusing to accept traditional sanctions and the authority that sets and maintains them. He re-defines the social boundaries. This is the work of God, healing and restoring; gathering everyone into the community of God, into the Kingdom, the basileia.

So, as I noted at the outset, we can do it too, we have the power! We can call out 'unclean spirits'; demons, whether they be in ourselves or in our community or

country. We can reset the boundaries and include those otherwise excluded. We need the courage to face and name what is destructive. Healing is in the change of heart that will follow. And in the restoration of those previously excluded to full participation in community will be the mark that we are doing the 'God job' in continuity with Jesus.

ⁱ Crossan, John Dominic. 1994. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. NY, New York. HarperCollins.