**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“Agents of Hope”*

Mark 9:38

September 30, 2018

In the first century world, demons caused all kinds of problems. New Testament scholar Brian Blount tells it like this, “They broke through human mental and physical defenses. Like thieves in the night they stole in and inhabited psyche. Then they drained all the human strength and personality they could find. They were hostile, malignant, spiritual parasites. Once they took hold, they ate up the human being [from the inside out]. They took away the most precious thing a person has, his or her self. In their place they left a meanspirited, angry wrecking ball of a human distorted personality. Then the person died.” (https://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/the-exorcist)

Whatever we make of the metaphysics of it, the experience of the battle with demonic forces was struggle for the soul of the people who were being torn apart. It was an exhausting chore just to maintain sanity in a world where dark energy seemed to have the upper hand. It was a struggle against forces you could only perceive as one person after another was turned into something they were not before. At the end of the day people felt powerless in the face of this mass of heaviness, this demonic realm of oppressive evil laying on top of their lives like a blanket that’s been soaking in the rain, weighing on everyone. And you wonder, waiting to see . . . who’s gonna go off the rails next.

“No wonder in the 1st century, exorcists were in high demand. This is one of the reasons Jesus was so popular in the gospel of Mark. He was an exorcist extraordinaire.” (Brian Blount) From the first pages of the Gospel, Jesus’ mission is characterized by his unflinching authority over evil forces assailing God’s children. Jesus didn’t beg, he commanded. He healed so many from diseases, sicknesses like blindness, lameness, deafness. But afflictions they didn’t have names for, the spirits, the demons, wrecked the most suffering. Jesus didn’t blink from them either.

Mark’s Gospel is salty not sweet, so it’s perfectly tailored to show this side of Jesus to people in any generation who feel the heavy weight of evil hanging over their society and need some relief. We need some relief. We, too, are living in a moment when what has been lurking in the shadows among us as a society is finally being exposed to the bright white light of truth. People who had been told to keep their mouths shut are speaking up and telling their stories. And it’s not pretty.

Things that were not spoken of, demonic things still happened whether spoken of or not, in every community of this country, by ordinary people, and politicians, movie producers, news anchors, priests and pastors, men old enough to know much better to treat women the way they did and boys who thought that girls existed for their amusement. What is your name? My name is legion, for we are many.

Hush. Shhh. Don’t speak of it. Men have power. Boys will be boys. But that day is over finally, isn’t it. Well, isn’t it? The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it, right? Lullabies won’t soothe our moral conscience to sleep any longer, will they? It’s morning, and this darkness must end. As far as I can tell from scripture, we would expect Christians to be right on the forefront of this battle, leading the way, shining the light, and yet it seems like the church is dragging its feet on this. It’s strange really. We’re supposed to be people who turn the other cheek, not turn a blind eye. What is more, the church has spiritual power, has authority to do good, except when we squander it.

Mark gives us a gospel for this moment.

Mark’s Greek vocabulary and grammar is unrefined; it’s raw, giving us a picture of Jesus that is unrefined and raw, powerful and righteous to save the world from demonic darkness. There are no sweet baby stories in Mark, swaddled in a manger, bathed in moonlight.

In the opening story of the Gospel, Jesus in a synagogue is confronted right there on his home turf by a man with an unclean spirit. When Jesus was confronted, there in the synagogue, he didn’t bother with niceties, with pleasantries, syllogisms, or sophistry. He didn’t weave a clever parable. He just commanded that evil spirit out of that man and set him free. He was like this all through the gospel, every malevolent force submitted to his glory: sickness, oppression, affliction, evil spirits, it didn’t matter. In Mark’s Gospel, God is on the move and everything arrayed against him better get out of the way. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus shows up and announces, “I’m here to say beatitudes and cast out the demons. And I’m all out of beatitudes.”

When Jesus commanded, things happened. Men and women and children whose psyches had been consumed by the raging, wrecking forces of evil were set free, their bodies now at rest, their minds now at peace. Set free, they were able to recover their selves, the God-given, ordained essence of their true selves, now released from captivity.

This was Jesus’ work. And it was his disciples’ too, to be agents of hope, renewal, freedom for suffering people. When they’d dropped their nets and walked off their daddy’s fishing boats to follow Jesus surely they didn’t fully realize what they were getting into. Maybe they thought they were chasing a lightning bug, only to discover they’d be struck by a lightning bolt. The church in its infancy were exorcists. When they were commissioned they were sent out into all the communities. And when they were sent out, they cast out the demons. The spiritual power manifest in Jesus Christ was made manifest in them, actually, to their own surprise and delight. God’s power and goodness on earth was on the loose in that little bunch of Christ-followers. God’s company of exorcists brought good news in the name of Jesus to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. They were harbingers of hope, shining lights of liberty, agents of divine love.

But then it wasn’t long before they didn’t know what to do with the power they had. And just like that, they lost it. By the time Jesus sends them out with divine power coursing through their spirits, they had power they didn’t know anyone could have. Until they didn’t.

They could heal the sick and cast out evil spirits. Until they couldn’t.

Then one day in a very public embarrassment told plainly by Mark in chapter 8, the disciples of Jesus couldn’t do the thing they were supposed to be able to do as grace-filled, Jesus-followers. A child was suffering. And they couldn’t make it better, no matter what they tried.

The child’s distraught father sees Jesus, runs to him carrying his child and says, “My child . . .a spirit makes him mute and whenever it seizes him it throws him to the ground, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.” That indictment stung, that verdict of the church’s impotency, “and they were not able.”

And they were not able. The church . . . in the face of evil. . . .powerless.

Thanks be to God, Jesus was there to heal what the church could not. He had compassion on the boy, healed him, and sent him on his way, but the gap between them and him was now fully exposed.

What happened? You decide whether it’s mere coincidence that their failure with the child is set right next to the story of their argument with one another about who in their little group is the greatest among them. Then decide which comes first: the public failure or the internal argument? Their incapacity to do something worthwhile or their fixation on who’s on first?

Which is cause and which is effect?

Were they arguing with one another to cover up their incapacity to do something that really matters? Or were they unable to bring healing because they’d forgotten the whole point that disciples of Jesus are here to serve not to be served?

As if that weren’t enough, in the next leg of their adventure in missing the point, one of them reports that they’d seen someone casting out demons in the name of Jesus and I tried to stop him because he was not following us.

They were supposed to be able to bring healing. Then they couldn’t heal. Then someone else they saw was healing. Instead of celebrating that and humbly returning to their vocation, they tried to put a stop to that unauthorized business.

The church is always in danger of losing sight of the idea that following Jesus is not about using his name as a badge of belonging, but that following Jesus is about living in his name as a commissioning to heal the world, to be exorcists of oppressive, personhood-robbing evil in the world. You are the light of the world. Walk as children of the light. Walking with Jesus is a lot of wobbly baby steps in the calling to renew the world in faith, hope, and love in which the world has hope of its redemption in its creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

Maybe the church loses its way when she realizes just how hard that kind of work is when you’re actually trying to do it. It means getting messy and tired. There’s no real glory in most of it. And its just so much easier to talk about the work than do the work. Much easier to talk about prayer than to pray, to have theories about love than to love, to believe in justice than to do what is right, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

Disciple, Christian, Follower of Jesus: Do we want to join the work or just wear the title? It’s a question posed by this story and every time it feels like we are overmatched by oppressive demonic soul-sucking darkness.

It’s so much easier--so, so, much easier to hide and huddle. In the disciples, here’s a group who have apostolic membership cards but can’t do the work up against an unauthorized exorcist who doesn’t have a title but is doing good. Do they celebrate him? No they do not. They aren’t open to learn from him or be inspired by him to recover who they’re supposed to be. Instead, they try to litigate him out of business for infringement of intellectual property rights. Jesus belongs to us and you can’t use his name.

We tried to stop the unauthorized exorcist, the disciples report. What they seem to think is that the reason they can’t overcome the evil spirit is that no one can, but this is not true. It’s not that the evil is so powerful that no one can take it on. Evil is never that powerful. Evil cannot overcome true goodness. Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate. The problem wasn’t that evil was too much or darkness was too dark; it was that they had lost their vocation. That someone else had somehow picked it up was salt in the wound.

Don’t worry Jesus, we tried to stop it. Why in God’s name would you do that, Jesus asks? Anyone who is not against us is for us. Let their good work remind you who you can still be as disciples, Christians, Christ-followers. Let the church always, in every place be people of grace, the salt of the world, God’s exorcists of evil, those who have the courage and grace to join Jesus in hope of the healing of the world.

May the image of Jesus be clear in your eyes

May the words of Jesus ring in your ears

May the thoughts of Jesus renew your mind

May the love of Jesus fill your heart

May the fire of Jesus set you ablaze

May the cross of Jesus still bring you to your knees

May the mercy of Jesus heal your tender wounds

May the grace of Jesus Christ be with you all. Let us pray for this grace and prepare to receive the sacred meal.