Sunday, February 2, 2003
UNCLEAN SPIRITS
Mark 1:21-28

"There was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit." (Mark 1:23) Imagine that! Suppose someone said that about First-Plymouth Church: "There was in their congregation a person with an unclean spirit." It might be embarrassing to some, but maybe that person would be here because they were looking for healing. You don't hear a lot of talk in today's modern scientific world about people having "unclean spirits." In some Bible translations, you don't hear much about people being possessed by demons either.

No matter which term you prefer, when it comes to unclean spirits or demons, you probably wonder whether to take them literally, seriously, or not at all. However, there is another option, and that is to attempt to understand what the gospel writers like Mark are getting at with these stories of Jesus and his encounter with unclean spirits. Then you can take that understanding and apply it to your life in the here and now.

The subject in this story from Mark's gospel is not unclean spirits. The main subject is Jesus and his power and authority. When the people heard Jesus teach, the story says, "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." And then they were really impressed with his authority and power when he healed a man with an unclean spirit. They said, "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." To do that takes real power and authority.

In biblical language, to have an unclean spirit can mean one or both of two things: to be defiled in a way that prevents you from participating in the worshiping community, or to be morally unclean, where the unclean spirit causes you to do terrible things. To be unclean in either way is to be separated from God. Remember the old saying, "Cleanliness is next to godliness."

The gospel writers — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — in telling the stories of people with unclean spirits want you to know that in the coming of Jesus, the reign of God is at work and people are no longer to be separated from God. That separation has now been bridged.

Paul says in Romans: "Who shall separate us from the love of God? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." And that includes "unclean spirits."

With this in mind, let's examine more carefully this subject of unclean spirits, for I believe this issue is as real today as it was two thousand years ago. You might be uncomfortable with the term "unclean spirit," but think of it this way: you have certainly known people who are controlled or possessed by some habit, addiction, or emotion which is destructive to them personally and which separates them from others and from God. Also, take a look at yourself.

Addiction is not difficult to recognize. To be addicted to something is to need it in order to have a sense of well-being. Drugs, alcohol, nicotine, and other substances or behaviors can become the organizing center of an individual's life. That's what it means to be possessed by an unclean spirit in a descriptive metaphor. All that matters is where the next drink, fix, or high is

coming from. People who are addicted in this manner rob convenience stores, individuals, and banks to get the money needed to support their habit. They neglect their work, their families, and their own health. They lie to themselves about the power of the addictive substance in their lives. Their lives have been taken over by an unclean spirit.

But be careful not to define having an “unclean spirit” too narrowly. You can be possessed by the unclean spirit of greed, envy, pride, anger, lust, gluttony, or sloth.

In case you don’t recognize this list of unclean spirits, they are traditionally known as the “seven deadly sins.”

It could also be that you have an overpowering obsession, which is another kind of unclean spirit. Human beings can be obsessed with all kinds of things — work, golf, sex, money, social status, power, the internet, maybe even Nebraska football. Some obsessions cause more harm than others. There are many varieties of unclean spirits, and doing battle with them is more a part of your experience than you might generally admit.

The story doesn’t tell us what kind of unclean spirit Jesus was dealing with in this man, but I have my own theory, which I will describe later. It’s important to know what kind of unclean spirit or spirits you might have. Only then can you begin to overcome it, and in most cases, you need help in dealing with it. It’s also important to know that the power of God as revealed in Jesus has authority over every kind of unclean spirit, and that power is available to you.

You also need to know that some unclean spirits are easier to recognize than others. For example, the unclean spirit of greed is often easy to see. On the other hand, the unclean spirit of racism is more difficult to recognize because it can be so subtle. One of the most difficult unclean spirits to discern is the deadly one called “sloth.” That’s a word not used very much today.

I am convinced that sloth was the name of the unclean spirit that possessed the man in this story from Mark’s gospel. The other unclean spirits named among the seven deadly sins are more straightforward and easier to understand. Even the word “sloth” sounds a bit archaic. It doesn’t sound very deadly. In the animal world, a sloth is a creature that hangs upside down in trees and sleeps most of the time.

It’s helpful to remember that the Greek word from which sloth is translated, “acedia,” means “I don’t care.” It is total apathy. It’s the ability to look at a starving child with a swollen stomach and say, “It’s not my child,” or to look at a lonely man in a nursing home with his head drooping on his chest and think, “It’s not my dad.” The unclean spirit of sloth is to have no compassion. It is coldness of spirit.

Too often, you think of sloth as mere laziness or procrastination. The unclean spirit of sloth is not about deciding one morning that you will roll over and go back to sleep. Those who are possessed by the unclean spirit of sloth have lost their faith in their ability to do anything meaningful or good with their lives. Their favorite expressions are: “So what?” or “I couldn’t care less.”

Boredom can be a symptom of the unclean spirit named sloth. Did you know the word “boredom” never existed until recent times? How can it be that you live in a society that has technologically tamed so many things, revels in such luxury, and possesses so many play-toys, yet is the most bored? Why is a child in the United States playing with ten thousand

dollars' worth of electronic gadgets bored, while a child in India is playing with two sticks and a stone and is content?

"I'm so bored," says the student in June, after the first few weeks of summer vacation. Parents, how long will it be after school is out before you hear that? A student says he does not enjoy math because it is boring. Some people leave their marriages because they are boring. All of these are signs of the unclean spirit of sloth at work.

I am convinced that this man was possessed by the unclean spirit of sloth because he so quickly recognized who Jesus was. I'm also convinced because he was in the synagogue. In the story, he says, "I know who you are — the Holy One of God." He recognized true authority. He knew that the power of genuine religious faith and the love of God present in Jesus could overcome the fog of sloth that had settled on his soul and taken away its vitality. At the same time, he was saying, "Stay away from me because I know you have the power to get rid of my unclean spirit." No one likes to give up their unclean spirit without a struggle. Whatever your unclean spirit is, be careful, for you can come to think of it as an ally rather than an enemy keeping you from living a full life.

Jesus was also calling the individual out of himself. This man was so wrapped up in himself that he didn't care enough to make a difference in anyone's life. Someone once said, "There is no smaller package in this world than a person who is all wrapped up in himself."

Another reason I am convinced this man was under the control of the unclean spirit of sloth is that of all the seven deadly sins, sloth is the most explicitly religious in character. The other six have religious connections but are also recognized as being evil without any necessary religious assumptions. You can define envy, greed, or lust without reference to God.

Jesus said that the greatest and most important commandment of all is to "love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself." A person possessed by the unclean spirit of sloth can't do this because all of their time is taken up worrying about themselves.

The unclean spirit of sloth can cause you to avoid your obligations when they demand effort and sacrifice — not because you are evil, but because you can't see the big picture and fail to understand what a difference you can make in this world if you stop worrying about your own aches and pains long enough to do something that might just make you forget them.

How do you get rid of unclean spirits like sloth? The first step is like the first step in AA: you admit that you have a problem, an unclean spirit like sloth. The man in this story from Mark's gospel did that. As I said earlier, he knew he had a problem, that's why he was in the synagogue, a place he was not supposed to be. Maybe he had heard that Jesus was going to be there. Once he met Jesus, he was certain he had a problem.

He recognized that he needed a power greater than himself to help him with his unclean spirit, and he sensed that Jesus had the authority and power necessary.

That's the point of this story. The power of God as revealed in Jesus has authority over whatever possesses you or anyone — addictions, obsessions, or anything that has taken control of your life and prevents you from being your true self, the person God intends you to be — a person with compassion, who loves God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loves their neighbor as themselves.

Here’s one more suggestion: If you are convinced that you could have the unclean spirit of sloth or any other unclean spirit, try this: today, do something good — something that takes you out of yourself, something that is good whether or not anyone notices, and be happy about that and that alone. If you do this, here’s what will happen: you will begin to find contentment and joy, which are the principal gifts of faith, gifts which the slothful never have. Amen.