“Be Silent, Build Love”

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Mark 1:21-28

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“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” 1 Corinthians 8:1. Another word for puffy knowledge is arrogance. Another word involved in love building up is humility, a giving of oneself for another. In Mark’s story of the demons “knowing” who Jesus is and calling him “Son of God,” and in Paul’s talk of eating or not eating meat sacrificed to idols because it may lead spiritually weak people astray, we see prime examples of how, in that culture, to know, to have knowledge, especially about someone else, is a way of exerting power over them. But Paul, rather than be arrogant about his knowledge, he leans toward love, patiently changing his own practices, abstaining from meat so as not to harm another person who hasn’t had the same type of revelation, doesn’t live with the same degree of freedom he does.

In Mark’s Gospel the very first thing Jesus does when his ministry begins, as his disciples follow, involves casting out demons. In the synagogue, a man with an “unclean spirit” has convulsions and screams as the demon comes out. In the dialogue, the demon uses plural language, wondering, “What have you to do with us, Jesus?” The passage, with all it’s drama, shows us what Christ continues to do: Epiphany; revealing the fullness of God’s love and how this love builds up, creating an abundant life rather than a diminished life, a stronger community, rather than a troubled world. Love builds up. When this man is healed he is restored to society, so this has to do with social justice. When this man is healed, his family is delivered from shame, so this has to do with healed relationships. When this man is healed, the people are amazed and Jesus establishes authority as a religious leader who doesn’t just talk about God like the prideful and powerful scribes, but lives to reveal God through compassionate action, so this has to do with the power of the living Christ revealed. In other words, there are layers of what this passage reveals, and it has to do with lots of things.

Notice the demon, for example, the unclean spirit, whatever it is that has this man captured, doesn’t come out easily. The man goes through convulsions, the man screams and shouts. It might have gotten pretty ugly, kind of scary, certainly unnerving, and yet leads to healing and wholeness, even on the Sabbath. Jesus heals the man, because through love, it’s the right to do, and this silences whatever it is that is resisting this.

Want to use it as a metaphor? We can link those demons with all sorts of things in our world. Addictions, greed, violence, arrogance, gluttony, whatever the title for the vice may be, most of the time we think those demons don’t live in us! (And they are plural)!

Yet, if we think the demons only belong to others, and we are somehow except from this type of spiritual struggle, this wrestling of our inner natures, then we are setting ourselves up for the very spiritual pride mentioned earlier, and the spiritually proud are the devil’s foot soldiers. Paul uses the word “knowledge” in 1 Corinthians. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Knowledge, without humility, is very dangerous, toxic to our own soul and to those around, very hazardous.

It’s through the eyes and ears of the heart, the spiritual perception of the heart, especially a broken heart linked with a renewed mind, where we are encouraged as we wrestle and convulse and scream out in struggle for the pain of life’s suffering to stop.

Friends, we can domesticate Jesus and the Gospel story. Or we can recognize the Living Christ in our midst going about the gut wrenching, heart shaping work of God in our own lives. Through our own struggles, pain, resistance and resentments, in tearing down our prideful arrogance, Christ engages us to let those demons go. But they only go kicking and screaming, not very willingly, and this is why we are “saved” through the work of Christ as God heals us from the inside, releasing us from that which has us bound up, seized.

One last detail to catch our eye. Most people, in talking about demons, assume they are evil, doing the devil’s work. Demons are scary and destructive, relentless in their desire to wreak havoc on the precious things God has made. But the detail to catch our eye involves the fact that demons, too, are created beings. They don’t just appear. They have angelic roots. One would think that if Jesus, Son of God, was casting out demons, he would do what the demons fear, “Have you come to destroy us?” Destroy them, conquering evil, that’s how we deal with our enemies. Jesus does “rebuke them” as Mark says, but it’s by saying something that on one hand sounds powerful: “Be silent, and come out of him!” Jesus, with authority, has power over them. But it’s not arrogant. Puffy knowledge is not the deciding factor or the active energy here, only love that builds up, even for the demons.

We hear echoes of the creation story where Adam and Eve eat fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and the are told to come out of the garden. Most people call this “original sin” and assume God kicks them out of the garden as punishment. But through the lens of love, their “original blessing” not only remains but has primacy, as God lovingly protects them from the tree of eternal life, the other tree in the garden, keeping them from living forever in the fallen state of sin.

Christ’s redemptive presence lovingly gives this troubled man healing and wholeness in the synagogue that day, and even the demons are invited to remember who they really are at their core as created beings, created good, desiring existence. “Be silent.” This is an invitation to trust, to let go. Rather than destroy them, Jesus tells them, shall we say, teaches them, invites them to “be silent.” Last week we read Psalm 62, where verse five says, “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.” Jesus is offering love, God alone, as a way for the demons to remember their inherent goodness as divine, angelic beings, healing this man on the Earthly plane and these demons in celestial realms. Silence is the solace Jesus offers them, in which they can remember and embrace God’s love and claim hope.

Then, as Suzanne Guthrie puts it, “The demons don’t want to change. They don’t want to be healed. But by resisting the divine in them they take others as hostages, denying them their own divinity, like the poor man in the synagogue.” (Suzanne Guthrie, Suzanne’s Meditation, <http://edgeofenclosure.org/epiphany4b.html>). The demons give in to their own weakness, and they continue to hide from the very God who seeks them.

It’s important we cut these demons some slack because its very often that we too give in to our weaknesses. Just as much as we’d like to equate ourselves with the healed person, and we can; so too we just as easily slip back into our delusions, transmitting our pain, denying our own core goodness and that of others. The doctrine of original sin is pervasive in shaping our world view, our image of God, and we become “possessed” by “all kinds of distractions obscuring” our original blessedness, our True Self in Christ; we’re like those weak people Paul talks about, who still assign idols their power.

We can invite Jesus to help us break this cycle, to nurture us in silence, gifting us with hope that empowers, builds up such that we can remember who we really are and look in the mirror and say, “I know who you are, Son of God, Daughter of God, Child of God, heir of God, heir of the covenant, co-heir with Christ.” We need to breathe deep the awareness of our inherent goodness, blessed and loved by God.

Jesus invites us to “be silent,” finding through contemplation the higher ground we need to detoxify as we rest in the sustaining Presence of the Holy Spirit, who helps us let go of the idols to which we cling, healing us from the inside out. God’s Spirit has authority in this, teaching our soul the true power of hope, the building of love, redeeming our spirit. This is the gift of God’s grace, this is new life in Christ, and this is why Jesus enters and begins to teach.

May we continue to learn the art of letting go so we may embrace the One who embraces us as love builds up and moves us through silence into hope,

love, peace, justice, and compassion, so we may show who this Jesus is whom we follow. Thanks be to God for the desire to live life, a desire for the good. May God be glorified, now & forever. Amen.