

The Power of a Word

Mark 1:21-28

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Pray with me:

Holy God,

Who sent your Word to us in flesh —

Help us to hear him this morning.

Help us to listen for the word

that just might set us free from the things that haunt us;

So that we might then be able to be a vessel of your liberating word for others.

Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Words have power.

A single word has the power to build up and to undo a person.

Valentine's Day is around the corner, so imagine yourself on the receiving end of this phrase: "I love you." It's a powerful word, love. Builds us up. Makes us feel like million, billion dollars! Butterflies in our stomachs. Like you've got the world on a string, sitting on a rainbow.

But that *same* word is just as powerful in the other direction when it's taken back, isn't it? What does it feel like when someone says to us, "I don't love you anymore"?

With their content and context, their tone and overtones, the truthfulness of them or not, and their relation to words already spoken and who is speaking and when and how and who is listening — words can have the power of a hurricane.

Words can be wizardry, with the power to destroy or create.

And words do create. A new poem recited — and a new world is created. Love confessed and new way is opened. Forgiveness offered and a new life is given. Where there was winter a garden blooms.

The great Jewish philosopher and theologian, Abraham Heschel said it like this, "Words are sacred; God's tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness or evil."

The holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoriums, and Hitler did not rise to power with tanks and guns. It all began with the uttering of evil words — defamation and propaganda and dehumanization. Words create worlds. Death and life are in the power of the tongue.

In stunning ways, this was true of Jesus. What made Jesus the bright center of a new hope among his people was what he said and how he said it. It's true that many people came to him for healing, but it seems that they remained and were spellbound by what he had to say – by way of vision and welcome and warning and guidance.

Even the healing he did almost always came forth from some word that he spoke. And we can be very sure of this at least: the government did not put him to death for being a healer, but for what he said and how he said it and to whom.

The very first story in the Gospel of Mark about Jesus' public ministry is all about the power of his words.

It was in the town of Capernaum. It was a sabbath morning, and all the towns people were gathered in the synagogue. Jesus, as a guest, was invited to speak. He did, and as he taught, the people were riveted.

Mark says, "They were astounded, for he spoke as one with authority; not as the scribes did." Meaning he had no need of quoting anybody. No need of equivocating or "on the one hand this and on the other hand that." But spoke with straightforward clarity, directness, vividness, a light in his eyes, a deep integrity, because clearly what he was saying was what he was living. "What authority!" they said. His words were making a new world for them.

But then, in the middle of the service, somebody went berserk. A man started shrieking, "Jesus of Nazareth, what do you want with uss?! Have you come to destroy uss?! I know who you are, God'sss one, God'sss one."

And Jesus said, "Shut up, and leave him." There was another scream, and the man convulsed. And then it was over, and the room was quiet and the man was fine. The story says it was an unclean spirit within the man, and that Jesus said, "Be silent. Leave him." And it did.

I guess that ended the service. I can't imagine Jesus saying, "Now where was I?" or somebody jumping up to lead in a closing hymn. My guess is that the people just made their way toward the door flabbergasted.

Mark says that some of them said, "What is this? A new teaching with authority?! Even the unclean spirits obey him."

Now when you think about it, that's a strange thing to say in that moment. They witnessed an exorcism and walk away saying, "A new teaching! A new teaching *with authority!* Even the demons obey."

Picture this in a church. The preacher is interrupted by a blood curdling scream. A man rises from his pew with green-grey skin. His head spins around. He is croaking awful words. The preacher says, "Hush. Come out of him." And the next thing you know the

man's complexion is back to normal, his eyes clear. He is fine. He's smiling. And as the people leave worship, they say, "Great sermon, pastor."

That's not too far off what's going on in this story. Astonished by his casting out of a demon, the first thing and the *main* thing these people say is, "A new *teaching!* And with authority."

Incidentally, Jesus was not the only one in his time and place who cast out demons or who healed deeply deranged people. There were other exorcists, but the way they worked was with long incantations and prayers and rituals.

With Jesus, it was just the saying of a word: "Shut-up. Leave. Scat." And it was done. A new world created. With him a word is enough.

But we have a hard time talking about demons, don't we? Talking about unclean spirits?

Can you imagine standing in Simon or Andrew or James or John's shoes? Day one as a disciple and Jesus is performing exorcisms. If this were my seminary, I'd be thinking about withdrawing and applying to a less... charismatic one.

We are blessed, aren't we, to live in a time when we have other means of treating the physical and mental ailments that our ancestors termed "possession?" The fields of medicine and psychology have made it possible for us to stop blaming everything we can't explain on demons and unclean spirits.

But I hope we won't let go of Jesus' exorcism stories too quickly because of the way Hollywood or Ouija Boards have made us think about the concept of demons and unclean spirits.

We need exorcism stories because they remind us that evil is real, and not theoretical.

Kathleen Norris says, "Scratch the surface of any ordinary church congregation and you will not find hypocrites but people struggling with demons" (*Amazing Grace*, 46).

She doesn't mean little red devils carrying pitchforks. She means the way in which our own brokenness and our own sinfulness can haunt us, infecting parts of our lives that we never meant for our sinfulness to infect. She tells the story of a pastor friend in a small, rural congregation who has several men who turn over their paychecks to the pastor to deliver to their wives; otherwise, they know they would gamble them away.

I will never forget when Christen and I served as summer missionaries on a small island in the Potomac River back in college. Our pastor there was a wonderful older man who had been brought up on the rough-and-tumble streets of inner-city Baltimore. His name was Larry and his wife was Janet.

Half way through the summer, his grandkids came to stay with them. Their mom wanted a break, and their dad – Larry and Janet’s son – was too drunk too much of the time to take them. So she dropped the kids on Larry and Janet’s doorstep.

Later that week, as Larry confessed the situation to me, he said, “We tend to think demons are like in the cartoons – sitting on our shoulder, whispering temptations in our ears. Demons aren’t ghosts or goblins. They’re more dangerous to our lives than that. They’re things we do to ourselves, like my son and his drinking. Sometimes we grab hold of something, and we have no idea that it might actually be grabbing hold of us...” Possessed by a demon named alcoholism.

Some demons are more obvious than others. But some are borne in private.

When I was at school at Princeton, I became friends with another student who had been special forces in the Army before his seminary days. He’d served multiple tours in Afghanistan, but now suffered near debilitating PTSD. As you might imagine, as special forces he’d witnessed some of the heaviest fighting of the conflict. He would never share the details, but he did share that he’d witnessed the traumatic death of a close friend and comrade – watched the whole thing happen, unable to do anything to save him. “It was a split second of my life,” he said, “but now I feel like I’m reliving that moment *every* second.” Possessed by a demon named “the horrors of war.”

For some it is being on the receiving end of painful words as a child – about their weight, about how they dressed, about their intelligence, about the color of their skin, about how poor their family might have been. Others wrestle with the demons left over from physical abuse, mental abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse. For many, betrayal is the demon has taken hold of them. Others have little control over the mental illnesses that plague them and make them feel less than worthy of a full life. And for others it’s the simple fear of not being good enough – of never measuring up.

I think I you get the point. Scratch anyone deep enough and you’ll find a demon they’d like to exorcise from their lives.

That’s why we need to keep these stories – because they remind us that evil is real.

And more importantly, they remind us that Jesus and what he taught stand against the powers of evil in this world – even when they are found in a place of worship on the sabbath, even when they are found in us.

Of those men who turned their paychecks over to their pastor, for fear they’d gamble them away, Norris points out that in their rural community, “the closest thing they have to a ‘support group,’ outside of their families, is that minister’s prayers, and the church to which they can go on any Sunday and be reminded that only Jesus Christ is in a position to condemn them, but he would rather they accept his forgiveness” (*Amazing Grace*, 46-47).

Is there a more powerful word to cast out a demon than “I forgive you?” or “You are forgiven?”

How many lives in the history of world have been returned to someone because they were on the receiving end of the word, *forgive*?

I hesitate to tell you this story on a Sunday morning in a sermon, because of how graphic it is. But I am also convinced that if we can't talk about *real* things in church, of all places, then the demons have already won.

It comes from the Rev. Fred Gagnon. He says:

“I was officiating at a graveside service for an elderly woman I had never met. I greeted the husband of the deceased woman, who was standing off to the side, his head bowed and his heart broken. We shook hands, and he thanked me for the nice service. Then he asked, ‘Pastor, can I talk with you for a minute?’

I followed him to a quiet area 20 paces away from his beloved's final resting place. He said he wanted to tell me something that he had only shared with two other people — and his wife wasn't one of them.

He was a World War II veteran who had served in Europe. One day his unit came under attack, and a mortar round exploded close to him.

‘I hit the ground,’ he said. ‘I was ok, but I heard another guy screaming. I could tell he was badly hurt. He was lying on the ground. His stomach was ripped open, and there was a lot of blood. I could see his guts. He kept hollering, saying he was in terrible pain. He pleaded with me to kill him.’

Tears welled up in the elderly man's eyes.

‘And I did,’ he said. ‘I shot him. I didn't want to, but he was begging me. He would have died anyway.’

There was a quite pause, then he looked at me and asked, ‘Do you think God will forgive me?’”

Talk about a man whose life had been possessed by a demon...

Gagnon says, “For more than sixty years he'd carried that terrible burden with him. I looked at him and said, ‘You did what you thought was right because you didn't want him to suffer any longer. God knows that. God also knows that you were in a terrible, no-win situation. So yes, I believe without a doubt that God will forgive you.’

He took my hand in both of his and thanked me” (“Power,” *The Christian Century*, January 4, 2017).

What, I wonder, is the terrible burden with which you feel saddled?

What keeps you up at night?

What part of you makes you feel unclean?

And what word do you need to hear that would silence those burdens and create for you a new world out of which to live?

Is it, you are forgiven?

Is it, I love you?

Is it, I am so proud of you?

Don't you think that Jesus knows? And don't you think he's whispering it to you right now?

So be *free* of it. By the power of his loving, forgiving word — be free.

Amen.