

LOVE IS MY NAME

God of liberation, confronting the powers that exclude the unclean and bind us to death; may we receive your word of authority, your rule of peace, your earthy holiness, which comes not to destroy but to set us free; through Jesus Christ, the holy one of God.

From Prayers for an Inclusive Church, Steven Shakespeare

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20, PSALM 111, 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13, MARK 1:21-28
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ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MARK 1:21-28

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

In his book *Seeds of Contemplation* (1945), the 20th century American Trappist monk, writer, theologian and mystic Thomas Merton wrote: "To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that Love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name."

The examination at Baptism

speaks of renouncing "powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God" and all that undermines us and draws us from the love of God – all that undermines the image of God in us – all that keeps us from expressing God's life of love in the world.

So in this gospel reading, in the man Jesus encountered in the synagogue with the unclean spirit, his true identity as love was in the

grip of something destructive – destructive forces were corrupting or damaging the world around him.

We may feel that way at times – or we may simply feel like something can be better – some aspect of our own life, or the life of our community – neighborhood, school, church, work, family – and the message we get may be something less direct than the unclean spirit addressing Jesus. We may simply hear: “that’s just the way it is.” Or as soon as some new life, some breath of fresh air begins to blow, someone snuffs it out or shuts the door....

This language of “unclean spirit” may trip us up but the reference is to anything that undermines life for human beings.

So we don’t need to be confused or put off by language like “unclean spirit” or “powers” or “sin” when we know all about brokenness and disappointment and frustration and fear.

Jesus shows up on a Sabbath in a synagogue – but as an out-of-towner and as someone not part of the authorized elite. And he is there to say that ‘the way things are’ is not the way things have to be.

This story from the very beginning of the gospel according to Mark, the first public thing that Jesus does in this gospel, tells of God showing up in an unexpected way and in an unexpected place to

do something least expected: to bring freedom to a person and community in the grip of destruction.

At its most basic, it says that God cares about people, pays attention to our distress, wants for us what we want: our true identity, our true character, and will cross whatever boundaries to show up with us and for us – and for those who share our community or communities with us...

And sometimes God shows up **as** us... in and with us, individually and together.

So this strange gospel reading may very well be the best one for an Annual meeting Sunday – not that we are going to go around calling out unclean spirits by name, perhaps shaming and judging, but we can recall for ourselves and help those in the world around us remember that **love is our name**.

That love is our true identity and our true character.

And we may cross a boundary as Jesus did – perhaps a boundary where people who are our neighbors are finding their lives undermined by forces that are keeping them in fear or hunger or isolation, subject to harassment or abuse – and through our work together and with others, to bring freedom, release, restoration of that image of God we share, the

love that is our reason for existing, our reason for living.

Jesus has his ways and gives us ours – ways for acting in the world, for bringing action into our community, for making real what we know, that because God is, because Christ is in us, ‘the way things are’ is not the way things have to be.

“To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that Love is

the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”

True for us, true for every person on earth – and the basis for what we do, our action as individuals and as a faith community in the world.



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