

This morning's gospel offers a Word from God that might make us a bit uncomfortable but is nonetheless critical for us to hear. Let me explain what I mean.

The gospel reading takes place in the synagogue, that is within the community of faith of Jesus. In order to understand what's going on here, we need to understand that any male within the tradition could talk about the passage read for the day. Various people could discuss the passage. Jesus appears to be participating in that conversation. Mark doesn't tell us what he's saying, but whatever it is, listeners are astounded because his words come from a place different than those of their normal teachers, their scribes, who did not simply record, or write, but were precursors to rabbis.

In the midst of this religious conversation, an unclean spirit names Jesus for who he is: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus takes care of that Spirit, doesn't he? He doesn't destroy the spirit, but he does banish it from the person whom the spirit inhabits. "And the unclean spirit, convulsing the man and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him."

We might note that removing an unclean spirit isn't free of pain. Any recovering addict—whether it is an addiction to alcohol or food or sex—any recovering addict will confirm that for you, as well as those of us who have dealt with less dramatic and more socially acceptable unclean spirits. Hardness of heart rather than forgiveness. Clinging to hurts rather than handing them off to the one who can heal them, "the Holy One of God."

This sounds like good news. And it is. So why might this story make us a bit uncomfortable? Because we must also ask Jesus to identify and confront spirits which would be better off elsewhere—or nowhere—than within our own faith community, or within our own hearts. And because we must *continually* ask this of our Lord—not just once, but over and over again.

My intention is not to say that *I* have identified a list of unclean spirits here at St. Mark's on the Campus from which I think we should pray for Jesus to deliver us. As I indicated last week, I'm not sure that I've been around long enough to name *one*, let alone a number!

And yet, as is true of every faith community, we all are quite human, and so it would surprise me a great deal if all of us did not have some things to put before Jesus for healing, and perhaps, for driving out of our lives—our individual lives—and of our common life together.

Now I recognize this is fairly dangerous territory. Remembering Sidnie's sermon a couple of weeks ago, neither am I suggesting we start hunting for these spirits in each other. However, as Christians we have an obligation each day humbly to place ourselves and our common life before Jesus for cleansing and healing.

More than one saint has said that spiritual maturity begins with that kind of humility; and wherever any of us are on the spiritual path, we all have room to grow more and more into the likeness of our Lord. And, of course, we are Christ's body, not our own. It is not *we* who rid our lives of spirits that need to move along. It is Jesus. His power, His grace. And His love.

Let us pray to Jesus that he might identify those spirits within our common life and our individual lives which keep us from serving him. And then, however painful, however uncomfortable it is, that his grace and power will work through us to rid our lives of those spirits.

It will simply be one more reason for us to lift our hearts in thanksgiving and love to our Lord Jesus.