

New Teaching

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20; Psalm 111; Mark 1: 21-28

One story that gets told over and over is the deal with the Devil story. Some mortal encounters the Tempter, and the Tempter knows there is something that the mortal wants very badly, and the mortal ends up selling his or her soul to the Devil in return for whatever it is that the Devil delivers. This is the plot of the Faust story-- I recall being very impressed with Goethe's treatment of it when I was younger-- but my favorite version of this is from the original film "Bedazzled," featuring Peter Cook and Dudley Moore.

A variation a lot of people may have had to read in school is Oscar Wilde's story The Picture of Dorian Gray. In it a young man finds a way to maintain his beauty and innocent appearance by having all the marks that the experience of life-- especially the defiling experiences of life, like moral recklessness--would leave on him instead appear on a portrait of himself which he has hidden in a room. As he mistreats people and eventually is driven to murder, he has the same choirboy looks as ever, but the portrait hidden away more and more reveals him as a monster. That's a visual way of conceiving the forfeiture of one's soul in return for benefits in this life.

A philosopher said "The best portrait of the human soul is the human face", and that also owes something to the idea that who we are inside ends up affecting our appearance. You probably sometimes meet someone who looks sweet to you, even if there's no opportunity for the person's personal qualities to be demonstrated, and you probably have encountered people who look tough to you, or hardhearted. Looks can be deceiving, but looks aren't always deceiving, or we wouldn't always be reacting to faces either positively or negatively.

The gospel has Jesus teaching in the synagogue when a man comes in with a withered hand. The man also is harboring an evil spirit, and the event of the story is Jesus' exorcism of the spirit. This is an ancient way of conceiving human illness and disability, and a way to cure it. We have half rejected this notion, both out of a compassionate regard for others which prevents us from presuming that their suffering has anything to do with who they are inside, and from a general disbelief in evil spirits. We half retain this means of understanding disease and health to the extent that we see that attitude and personality affect persons' well-being, and many of us feel that prayers have aided us in our recoveries from difficulties. In any case, what interests me here, with regard to the man who comes in and needs healing, is the correspondence between something visible about him which is not what it should be, and the invisible spiritual domination from which he suffers.

There are people who are marked by what one might expect to be a hidden problem. One not uncommon case is mentioned in Proverbs, chapter 23, verses 29 and

following. It reads "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? [these last two get to the visible marks of an interior cause; the proverb continues:] [Who has all these things?] Those who linger late over wine, those who keep trying mixed wines." Addictions of various kinds often alter people's appearance.

It needn't be chemically-connected urges which make people look a certain way. The way a person lives, the stance a person has on what is acceptable and what should be avoided, the amount of human sympathy in a person's breast and the kind of character and conscience formed by a person's experiences, all tend to show. That's the best analogy between what happens in the Bible story and what happens in our world right now. Men and women walk through life burdened by appetites or attitudes or instincts which shape who they are, to a greater extent or a lesser, and often a clue to those interior qualities appears in what they look like, how they carry themselves, how you read their faces.

It's not all a matter of vice, either. Sorrow, discouragement, even unwarranted high spirits may be discerned from looking at a person's eyes, posture, the way he or she moves. What connects all these interior states with the man in the gospel lesson is that not only is what's inside a person often telegraphed by visible cues, but unhappy or unwholesome spirits in a person react with anxiety to the true presence of God. As soon as the man is in the synagogue and detects the spiritual reality of Jesus, which is the true presence of God, he reacts. Or more precisely, the spirit within him reacts.

I call it anxiety, because even though it is described as an evil spirit, it is not hostility perhaps so much as fear which is expressed. The crippling spirit within the man knows that Jesus is against it, and the effect it has on its victim, and will try to get rid of it, end its domination. Also, in the logic of that time, the evil spirit would lose its home, the embodiment it parasitically enjoys by possessing the person afflicted with it.

If we use the language of possession and exorcism then we begin to discuss what for most of the world is an outmoded understanding of human trouble. If we use terms like discontent and disease, depression and addiction, then we are on familiar ground. If, for instance, you have ever suffered from depression or known someone who suffers from it, you will know that the victim of depression is prevented, by the depression itself, from doing things which would help get rid of the depression. It raises a person's spirits to be with people, to be physically active, to get a lot of sunlight. Those are things the depressed person avoids. It is as if the disease, conscious of the risk it would run if it would permit the person freely to socialize, or exercise, or go for a walk on a pretty day, infects the person with languor, and with choosing solitude, and with preferring a dark room.

Many people who are uneasy about religion will make jokes about the ceiling of the church collapsing if they show up in worship, and at least some of the time, that betrays a spirit within them anxious about exposing themselves to the closeness of Christ. That fear of Jesus may be a mistake-- the person may have an exaggerated notion of Jesus'

severity or disapproval-- but if that's the case, that also is a troubling spirit which Christ ought to be given the opportunity to heal. In fact, one reason the weekly worship service includes a service of confession and words of assurance is to get people past associating God with guilt. It doesn't always work as it should. Sometimes people don't like to admit to not being quite right, and sometimes people willing to acknowledge that don't really accept the power of God or the desire of God to forgive and heal them. This gospel lesson today, when the inner voice of the marked man challenges Jesus, should remind all of us to be aware of reactions within ourselves of anxiety in the presence of holiness. We should recognize those as a chance for new life.

The other thing I want us to notice in the gospel story, besides the way Jesus' effectiveness validates him, and makes him, in the language of Deuteronomy, "a prophet raised up like Moses", is the reaction of the others in the synagogue. We are told that Jesus taught as one with authority, and not as the scribes. The next thing that happens is this man enters who has the troubling spirit within him, and offers his worried challenge to Jesus: "have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus says "be silent, and come out of him," and there's a wrenching reaction of the bad spirit going-- troubled spirits which have established domination over a person never go easily-- and that's when those present react. The other persons in the synagogue say, "What is this? A new teaching!"

That's the word that strikes the reader. This is a new teaching. All the other teaching in the synagogue, done by scholars of the scriptures, done by persons faithful to the tradition, has been about the power of God. All the other teaching refers to wonderful events. Jesus, no matter how authoritatively he has been instructing them, ceases to be a scholar of religion, or even the most wonderful church school teacher possible, when this man enters with a spiritual problem. What is learned is not about tradition-- what is learned, by the declaration from the spiritual realm of the dis-ease in the man, is that Jesus is the Holy One of God. What is learned is not an insight into the scriptures or a new way of thinking about a familiar passage, but that the spiritual power of God is present in the midst of people, to save them from anything within them which enslaves them. Jesus himself is a wonderful event, and the ancestral faith is no longer just the most spiritually significant part of the culture of these people. It is an arena for encountering God's holiness and securing God's help, real help for real people with real problems.

Let me quickly say that our hosting Alcoholics Anonymous meetings is not just the kind of good deed that good institutions do. It's our recognition of the power of the ministry of a movement which has enabled millions to be set free from domination. Our interest in offering a sympathetic ear to the troubled is not just human compassion, it's part of the ministry of Christ, carried on in the place of worship. Sometimes what we talk about and hear about at church sounds like old stories, but this also and foremost is a place for the power of the living God to change people's lives, thanks be to God.

*To read sermons from past years, hit the "View All" link beneath the "This Week's Sermon" button, and then hit the "Archives" link in the sentence at the top of the page presenting recent sermons.*