

Sermon Epiphany 4B
All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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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.

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How clean is your house? If you’re anything like me, “Them’s fightin words.” At the beginning of the pandemic, when we thought we were just staying home for a couple weeks (Remember “14 days to flatten the curve”?) my house was so clean! I had nothing to do, so I did laundry, scrubbed showers and vacuumed carpets. It was nice, actually. But since then, for the most part, our house has been a wreck! Why clean, when we’ll stay home again tomorrow just messing it up all over again? And no one’s coming over to see it!

If you’re anything like me, you may have just stopped paying attention how dirty your house is...I mean, let’s give ourselves a break, right? But on the other hand, we’ve begun paying a LOT more attention to keeping ourselves clean. Wash your hands; don’t touch anything; wear your mask; keep your distance. There’s something out there that we’re trying really hard to stay away from, scrub off, disinfect and exterminate. Due to COVID, we’ve become hyper-focused on cleanliness in a way that may be hard for us to ever let go of... which may not be a bad thing.

We hear a lot about “clean” and “unclean” in the Bible. There are lists upon lists of what food, actions and even people are considered unclean and to be avoided in the Old Testament. And in the new testament, we hear about the way Jesus interacts with people or spirits that are labeled “unclean,” like the demon possessed man we encounter today. A demon possessed man barges in - on the sabbath - of all days! Bringing with him an unclean spirit - into the synagogue - of all places! And Jesus stops his teaching in order to confront this spirit, to drive out this demon. We see right off - in chapter one of Mark’s gospel that Jesus has come, not just to teach, but to act, to put an end to Satan’s reign of terror. He’s come to clean house.

Jesus has come to deal with the forces of death and destruction that threaten the children of God. He’s come not only to comfort the distressed, but to confront the demons that take hold, that take our

peace, that take the place of God in our lives. There's something making a mess of this man's life, and Jesus is here to set him straight.

How clean is your house? If you turn your gaze inward, and take a look around, what do you see within? "Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?" St. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians. Don't you know that what's going on in there can either make room for or crowd out space for the Spirit of God? The Spirit of God deserves a dwelling place that is clean and tidy. So, how clean is your house? What kind of temple upkeep routine do you have going on? What kind of living space do you have cleared for God to enter in? Or what kind of deferred maintenance do you need to get started on so that your thoughts, your actions, your intentions may be more fully inhibited by the Spirit of God?

And what do you need to step aside and have Jesus to clean out for you? When you stop and take a closer look, what spiritual clutter do you really need help getting rid of? That emotional baggage that as hard as you try you may need to admit, only Jesus can lift for you... Or what physical ailment do you need to place fully and completely into the hands of your Savior?

Just like with the man in the synagogue, sometimes, there are things that if we are honest with ourselves have moved in and taken over. Things too strong and too dark for us to keep trying to shake off by ourselves. If we are ready to admit it, we may recognize that in the place of God, an unclean spirit, an unhealthy addiction, an untenable posture is blocking our spiritual health, draining our physical health, maybe even threatening to take over our whole lives, and only Jesus, the Son of God, can reckon with. Sometimes, we just need to come with our demons exposed before Christ and profess, "I know who you are, Holy one of God!" and confess, "You alone can make me clean once again." "You alone have the power to defeat the forces which are taking away my life." If we profess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we need to recognize when time to step aside and let him save us, again.

How clean is our house? As a congregation, as a community, as a nation? What demons do we have lying beneath the surface that we ~ collectively ~ need to lay bare before the Lord of Hosts? We are under a lot of pressure to be that shining city on a hill, and so sometimes, we choose to bury the issues that really need to be unearthed and dealt with.

Here at All Saints - we're a wonderful, welcoming community! We say All are welcome. We say all means all. We say all are loved - no judgment. But what little judgments get passed in our minds, in those little private conversations, or just perpetuated silently by all of us to keep us feeling safe and superior, that keep us from truly living out Christ's ALL-inclusive, radical welcome?

Here in our community of Mt. Pleasant - we're an All American city! We have great schools, great programs, great opportunities. We are proud of who we are and the ways we sets the standards for others around the Lowcountry and the State. But what ugly realities are we unwilling to recognize? What persistent prejudices are we unlikely to name? What injustices are we ready to ignore - or, more likely, drive by at 55 miles per hour - so we don't have to let them burden our consciences or change our plans?

Here in America - Oh, America, the beautiful! We're the shining beacon on the hill - a bastion of democracy which stands for liberty and justice for all, right? Well, we hope so. But I think we've

begun to see that there are some persistent pockets of malady plaguing us, bubbling to the surface in the form of antisemitism, racism, white supremacy, and political hatred.

Most of the time, those forces are easy for us to ignore, to cover up, to overlook, when they're not waving their flag on national TV. But as those of us involved in the Community Bible Study can tell you, they're never far from the minds of our brothers and sisters of African descent. This Community Bible Study has been a beautiful thing. Even though it's on Zoom, and that's always a little awkward, the honesty and openness we've encountered in only the first two weeks has been truly inspiring.

In small groups, we've had the opportunity to share and listen to members of neighboring AME churches sharing their experiences in the context of the study of God's Word. And we've been hearing that the trends and phenomena we have to read about, they experience first-hand. The surfacing of hate groups and white supremacist cells in the recent months and weeks influenced the choice of the "Facing Racism" curriculum for our annual Community Bible Study. The leaders in our local community realized it was time to bring it out into the open, to sit down face-to-face and talk about it among the members of our congregations and our community. And through the trust we've been building with our neighbors in the study, we have been able to hear the stories, the witness, the pain that our siblings in Christ carry with them. Their dignity has been rebuffed, their worth undermined, and their communities diminished as a result of the persistent illness plaguing our nation.

By sitting down and listening, by beginning to get to know each as neighbors, we're opening the doors for Christ to enter in and reckon with the powers of evil still at work among and within us. We're inviting Christ to clean house, to come in, to find the demons among us, and through the power of his Word, to expel them, once and for all. We can't do it alone. If we could, we would have done it by now. We need Jesus. He alone can get into those hard-to-reach places in each of our hearts that have been tacitly harboring - or at least permitting - the injustices at work in our world.

To recognize how Jesus at work on this front, we may have to look closer than we think. To hear the authority which comes from God, we may need to listen to someone who doesn't sound the way we expect or doesn't look the way we expect. If we could hear the answers from the voices we're used to attending to we would have heard them already. If we could find the solutions in the places we're used to looking we would have seen them already.

When Jesus comes into the synagogue, he doesn't have the title or position the scribes have. He's not wearing the right clothes, he's not from the right neighborhood. He doesn't have the pedigree, but they find out that he has the authority. And he shows it by stepping up and doing the dirty work. By his word, he expels the demon threatening the life and liberty of this man. By his power, he exterminates the unclean spirit and makes room instead for the Holy Spirit to enter in. Healing has arrived and it has the power to grant new life in the places deemed by society as unredeemable. It has arrived in the person of Jesus. It has arrived in his holy Word. It has arrived in the second chances and the cracks in our communities and in real, valuable, redeemable lives. Jesus is here, and he's ready to get to work. Time to open our broken hearts and let him in.