

Mark 1:21-18/January 31, 2021

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, there is one thing you need to know for today's Gospel reading to make any sense. In Jesus' day, it was understood that uncleanness was catchy. Cleanliness was not catchy. Uncleanness was.

This was because of the purity laws of the Temple. If you touched someone who was sick, oozing anything, or dead, you became unclean and were not allowed in the Temple until you became clean, which was usually a certain amount of time and a good bath.

If however, you were the unclean one, there was no hope for you. You couldn't become clean until you were no longer sick, no longer oozing anything, and, well, no longer dead.

So, it is by no accident today that we are told that there was a man with an unclean spirit. He doesn't have a "demon." He literally has an unclean spirit. What does that mean? We're not sure. There is a lot of speculation, but the important thing here is that he was contagious, because uncleanness was contagious.

Earlier in this chapter, yes we're only in the first chapter of Mark, Jesus has been baptized and received the Holy Spirit, and now we have a showdown in the synagogue. The Holy Spirit versus an unclean spirit. Who will win?

Now, everyone else hanging around that synagogue that day was just a regular ole person, at least on the spirit side of things. It's not yet Pentecost, so the Holy Spirit hasn't been unleashed on everyone. They're just hanging around with neither an unclean spirit nor the Holy Spirit, and they're likely afraid that they might catch that unclean spirit, because unclean is contagious.

But, the unclean spirit doesn't even bother acknowledging the other people. It goes right up to Jesus and asks him what in the world he is up to. It knows that Jesus can destroy it, and in a remarkable turn of events, it is afraid. With the Holy Spirit, it knows that Jesus can destroy it and send it packing.

The thing with spirits is that they need someone to live in. No person, no spirit, and so the unclean spirit is worried, and just what it thought might happen happens. Jesus casts it out and the man comes back to himself. He comes back to being who he really is. The man is set free and instantaneously he becomes clean.

Instead of the uncleanness being catchy, God is. The Holy Spirit is catchy and cleans everything up - restoring life, relationships and entire communities.

Have you seen the 2003 movie *Bruce Almighty* with Jim Carry? The first one with Jim Carry as the weather man Bruce Nolan who gets God's powers for a little while?

In that movie, Morgan Freeman is playing the part of God. When Bruce first meets God, God is mopping the floor and God invites Bruce to join him, but Bruce is too preoccupied with all of his own issues to even remotely want to help.

Sarcastically he tells God that he'll take a rain check on the mopping. God tells him that he'll be held to it. Bruce fires back that he'll be free on the 7<sup>th</sup> at 7 tying in with all of the 7s in the building.

When he finally leaves the building, Bruce has been endowed with God's power and all he can think of is himself. He seeks revenge, gets the car he's always wanted, makes up news stories to make himself famous, and even changes his girlfriend to meet his own ideal.

If you haven't seen the movie, you can imagine what happens. Complete and total disaster. Bruce being self-centered destroys everything, including his own relationships. He always thought he was getting the short end of the stick and that if he was just famous enough he would be happy and everything would be right in the world, but all of his self-centeredness didn't really make him happy. It only made things worse for everyone – the people he knew and the people he didn't.

I guess you could say that Bruce's uncleanness was catchy in the way it impacted other people, but just before everything went up in smoke it was the 7<sup>th</sup> at 7pm and Bruce found himself with God mopping the floor. The more Bruce mopped, the better things got for everyone. When they finally finished cleaning the floor, everything was made right and Bruce came to love himself.

The uncleanness was his own battle with himself of not being enough. God shows him that he is enough, and with that Bruce knows joy for the first time, and that becomes contagious with everyone he encounters.

The world thinks that uncleanness is contagious, but with God it's the total opposite. With God, life is contagious, because Jesus is the Word of God, the author of life.

Jesus is the authority, because Jesus is the author. He wrote life in the beginning and that is why he is risen from the dead. You can't kill the author of life, and through the Holy Spirit, life become contagious.

In holy baptism, we are guaranteed the gift of the Holy Spirit – the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of council and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in God's presence. The gift of life. A gift that is stronger than any pollution that is sent our way. A gift that is even stronger than death.

With Jesus, it's not uncleanness, or un-holiness, or ungodliness that is contagious, but holiness is – Holy Spirit-ness. God's love and life is what is more contagious, love that is known in service to others.

Jesus died on the cross for us out of pure love. It was a service he did for us. Through the Holy Spirit, that story becomes ours as we are written into God's story, the story God authors and Jesus reveals with authority.

Simply caring about another person is enough to send unclean spirits flying. You know firsthand that when someone does something for you or says something nice to you how much better you feel. Simply having them acknowledge your existence is enough to change your entire day.

In 2021, the ELCA Youth Gathering was in New Orleans. I took the youth from the congregation I was serving. We had just been talking about how God heals all wounds when we came across a man who appeared to be homeless.

As the miles and miles of youth went walking by him, he would yell obscenities at us. Most youth directors took their kids on a wide berth, but I encouraged one of my youth who had noticed the man to bring him our snacks. We had a ton of them back in the hotel. He wasn't sure it was a good idea, but I went with him. It actually reminded me of working with injured animals at the zoo.

Slowly we approached. We didn't look him in the eye. We just told him we were going to share our snacks with him. We set the snacks on the bench and slowly backed up. He yelled at us a little more, but then looked at the food and sat down. He started eating and we didn't hear him yelling anymore.

Love is contagious. Love is more contagious than hostility.

In love, we loved someone else and did what little service we could do – we simply acknowledged him as a beloved child of God. We did that through some cookies and granola bars.

Today we can do the same thing by simply wearing a mask to the store. It's the same idea. It's a super simple way of telling another person they matter – they matter to God.

Last week, Kyle Clark did a story on Next about how to talk with people who have been taken over by extremist ideas. In the story, the psychologist he was interviewing said that the first step is just acknowledging the other person as a person. People are people first before they are their political party or anything else.

She said that the last thing you should do is tell them they are wrong. The first thing you should do is ask them what is going on with them. Why do they find that line of thought so appealing?

She said that most people who get taken over by extreme ideologies do so because of a personal trauma. Maybe they lost their job. Maybe a relationship just ended. Maybe they just found out they have a disease they don't know how to face and they feel all alone. More than likely they are feeling as if they have lost themselves and that no one cares.

But, Jesus cares. And because Jesus cares, we care. The Holy Spirit is contagious.

You may have heard Justin Bieber's song *Lonely*. What I know is that if Justin Bieber just took some time to care about other people, to serve some people and not make money doing it, he wouldn't feel so lonely.

If you want to know the secret to life, it's service to others. It's such a powerful thing that it couldn't even keep Jesus dead.

The Holy Spirit is stronger than every unclean spirit out there, and we have been gifted with that Spirit for the sake of the world in the little corner of it that we have access to.

You are a beloved child of God and so are all of those other children with unclean spirits, so let us go out with the Holy Spirit to bring healing to a hurting world, because that's what we're all about – that is the Peace we have in Christ. That's the peace we have to share. Thanks be to God. Amen.