

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**January 31, 2021    Streaming Mass**  
**4th Sunday of Year B    Mark 1:21-28**

A recent study conducted two years ago revealed that there are 940 hate groups in the United States. And I am sure the number has only grown since then. Why do we hate? The reasons are complex, but I would suggest the root of hate is fear—fear of “the other” and fear of our selves. It is this second kind of fear, fear of our selves, that this morning’s Gospel addresses, although expressed in a way much different than how we might speak today. But, make no mistake, the reality addressed is the same.

The things people hate about others are the very things they fear within themselves. One might think of the targeted person or group as a movie screen onto which are projected unwanted parts of one’s self. The idea is, “I’m not terrible, you are.” Every society has ways of distinguishing those who are allegedly superior from those who are inferior, those who can be trusted from those who are feared. In the time of Jesus it was something called “purity or holiness codes,” legislated and enforced by the “scribes,” the official teachers of religion, which distinguished who was “pure,” who was “impure;” who was “clean” and who was “unclean;” who “defiled” and who “undefiled;” who was “holy” and who not; or, as we might say today, who had it “all together” and who was “damaged goods.” The markings to distinguish one group from another covered everything from the foods one could eat; when one could work; the people with whom one associated; one’s physical appearance; of course, one’s behavior; and, as we see in today’s Gospel in “the man possessed of an unclean spirit,” even one’s mental health.

In Mark’s Gospel, which is the gospel we will be reading on Sundays this year, the pace of activity is very swift; one scene follows quickly upon another. Mark paints Jesus as a “Man on a mission.” There is work to be done, and that work is to overcome the forces of evil, the powers of darkness. Jesus is depicted as being in combat, in a struggle with demonic powers. Today we see “Round One” of that struggle--Jesus is confronted by evil in the person of the “man with an unclean spirit.” That man identifies Jesus as the “Holy One of God.” It is less an affirmation of faith, than it is an accusation, tinged with sarcasm. *You* are the Holy One? Implied is the charge that if Jesus were indeed “holy,” as the scribes would define “holiness,” He would not associate in any way with this man. Hence, the question, “What have you to do with us?” Again, if Jesus were “holy,” He would leave the demons alone and let them torment the man, lest by engaging the “man possessed,” He (Jesus) be

contaminated by the man. The demons go on, "Have you come to destroy us?" In other words, "Do you think you can beat us without being drawn into our own "uncleanness?" If Jesus values "holiness," as the scribes say a good rabbi should, He should have the good sense to stay away. The demons are questioning Jesus' sense of Himself, His identity, who and what He claims to be. "Aren't You just a charlatan?" is what they mean.

And how does Jesus respond?" Jesus is not threatened or intimidated by the accusing voices of the demons. He does not respect the holiness codes enforced by the scribes. He trespasses them. He violates them willingly. He is proclaiming a theology, a teaching, a way of living, where none of God's children can be written off because they do not fit into the grid constructed by the scribes as to who is worthy and who not, who is ok and who is not ok. "He tells the demons, "Be quiet!" Convulsing and screaming, the unclean spirit leaves the man. Because Jesus speaks from the core of His being "as one having authority," He is not limited by the narrow-mindedness of the scribes, by their fear of contracting impurity. His is an expansive vision that the crowds have never heard before. They are amazed at what He has done.

Now let's take a look at ourselves in light of today's Gospel. Evil can present itself in many forms, but there are some forms of evil that can appear to us especially toxic, especially hurtful, in that they seem to attack us in a very personal way, the kind of evil that gets under our skin. Why it is that someone or something can appear particularly evil to an individual? Why is there a toxicity, a poisonous quality, associated with certain individual's very existence? I would suggest that there are certain people who simply by being there in front of us, simply by being who or what they are, have this eerie power to name, to accuse, to judge us. Their very presence is like the voice of the man possessed in today's Gospel who cries out "I know who you are." Any one of us can find ourselves in that situation, in confronting what appears particularly threatening to our self-image. A voice seems to scream out; a voice only you can hear, which speaks to you quite specifically; a voice that leaps across the chasm of abstraction or distraction to flush you out, to reveal what lurks in the dark recesses of your heart; a voice that hisses "I know who you are; others you can fool, but you can't fool me; I know what you are."

That condemning, accusatory voice is the person whose very insertion into our lives mirrors the fears, the longings, the insecurities, the defects of character deep within our heart. In a manner that only the accused can hear, that voice unveils the kind of person he or she knows they truly are, but is unwilling to confront. Because that person, thing or situation has the ability to get behind our defenses, under our

skin, it seems to have the power of the demonic, to grab us, to possess us, to haunt us. Just one example, why do people become most upset at the death of those who most resemble themselves? Death is no longer an abstraction, something that happens to everybody. Now it is actually something that can happen to me. Why is it that we find certain character defects in others particularly annoying, whether it be their tardiness, dishonesty, ego, passivity or aggressiveness, their whatever, unless we see very dimly those same qualities lurking within ourselves? Or, with bullying or gay bashing, might it not be that the perpetrator recognizes in others the same feelings they intuit, but dare not face in themselves?

How do we respond to that voice that shouts at us in so many words, "I know who you are?" We respond by avoidance, we want nothing to do with those kinds of people. We push these unpleasant reminders quietly out of our lives. We try to make them invisible, so as not to have to deal with them. Or, we become angry with them; we make them the scapegoats of our fears and anxieties. By condemning those who most resemble our selves, or resemble what we fear we might become, we try to acquit ourselves. By finding others guilty, we imagine ourselves innocent. Might that account for the toxic rage that some direct towards others who do them no harm, except simply being who and what they are?

In today's Gospel Jesus is challenged at the core of His identity. Is He really holy? What is holiness anyway? How does Jesus deal with the accusing voice? He engages it, He confronts it, He defangs, He detoxifies it, so that this demonic force has no power over Him. Jesus is able to separate, to distinguish the "man possessed" from the threatening voice that is coming out of the man, and He restores the man to health. At the same time Jesus rededicates Himself to the path of genuine holiness that He is to follow.

What Jesus does in today's Gospel is what He empowers us to do as well, i.e., to be able to separate, to distinguish our fears, our anxieties, the threats to our well-being, from the individuals who take the rap for those insecurities. We are released from having to blame others for what really is all about us. And, once we can recognize who we actually are, then we can be exorcised of those demons; they have no power to call us out, to "name" us. We live in a society wherein everyone wants to think, or claim, I am ok, that I have it all together. Or, I may think that I am ok and you are not, so I have a false sense of superiority. Or I may think I am not ok and you all are ok, so I have a poor sense of self worth. The truth is I am not ok and you are not ok—and that's ok. Knowing that, we can live without threat, without fear, without hate in the freedom Jesus offers to us.