

4th Sunday Ordinary Time B

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Who is this man with an unclean spirit that shows up in the synagogue today? He is loud. He interrupts. He draws our attention the way an unbathed, talking to himself, homeless man would catch our attention if he showed up at Saint Ann's. The man with an unclean spirit is for many of us, I suspect, the shocking and intriguing part of today's gospel.

Ironically, he does not have that effect on the people in the synagogue. Their attention is on Jesus. They are astonished by his presence and teaching. It is like nothing they have ever heard before. He has authority. His words mean something. They make a difference. Even the man with an unclean spirit is shocked and intrigued by Jesus. **“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”**

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. His authority fills not just the place but each person there. And almost immediately this man with an unclean spirit shows up. The presence of Jesus, the man with a clean spirit, draws out the presence of the man with an unclean spirit. Jesus has that effect on people. His authority and teaching reveal the truth about his listeners' lives.

This one with the unclean spirit is an image of what the lives of those in the synagogue look like. His uncleanness is not about personal

hygiene, immorality, being bad, or Judaism. Instead, his presence “**in their synagogue**” describes the disease of their soul, their fragmented lives, and the many voices within them. In looking at him they see themselves and they are astonished by the contrast of the one who has a clean spirit.

“**What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?**” He senses the distance between his life and Jesus’. His words betray his isolation. It is not, however, just about him. He speaks not only for himself but for all those in the synagogue that day. He represents everyone who has ever experienced the brokenness of life. He is the spokesperson for all who feel disconnected from themselves, others, or God. He represents the human condition. Behind his question is, I believe, the unspoken longing and hope that Jesus would say, “**Everything. I have everything to do with you.**” Those are the words that can begin to put his life back together.

We are not so different. Each one of us also longs for that answer because we too know the separation and brokenness of our own lives. We have lived in isolation. We have been trapped in grief. We have carried the burden of guilt. The truth of those situations often reveals itself in the many personas we wear.

At some level, we all project various personas or images of how we want others to see us and how we want to see ourselves. Sometimes it is as simple, and seemingly silly, as saying, “**I cannot go to the grocery**

store looking like this. I have no make-up on, and my hair is a mess.” Or we smile and say, “Yes, everything is just fine,” and quickly change the subject when hanging on by a thread and not sure how we will get through the rest of the day. We don’t want our life to be seen in its unmade-up condition.

We use our personas as masks to hide the truth of what our life is like and who we are. The tragedy is that they also hide who we might become. It seems that those masks most often arise from the many voices that live within us. They are the voices of condemnation and guilt, grief, fear, anger, and judgment. They are voices that keep us in constant comparison and competition with others. They are voices demanding perfectionism, asking, “**What have you done for me today?**” The voices are never satisfied. We are never able to do or be enough. Every one of those is a false voice, the voice of the unclean spirit that separates us from our authentic selves, from all that we love, and all who love us.

Someone recently asked me, “**Why do I care so much about what other people say and think about me?**” I thought about today’s gospel. I thought about false voices, an unclean spirit, separation, and a longing for acceptance and approval. All of those are contained in her question. She could just as well have said, “**What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth?**” She could be the man in today’s gospel. But then so could you. So, could I.

We are such funny people. Deep down we long for intimacy and authenticity but the last thing we want is to be found out, to have someone see us for who we truly are and are not. So, we put on a good front hoping that will gain us approval, acceptance, and love.

We say the right things, act the right way, dress, and behave the right way, and even believe the right way, and all the while we are creating ourselves in the image and likeness of the unclean spirit. The irony is that those fronts we put up, those personas, keep us from having the very things we think they will gain us, things like intimacy, love, acceptance, healing, forgiveness, and authenticity. The personas offer no possibility for life to flourish and be abundant. Still, we hold on to those false voices, voices that collectively ask, **“Have you come to destroy us?”**

That is exactly what Jesus has come for. He has come to destroy. He silences our false voices. He casts out all our personas and makes us people with a clean spirit. He has everything to do with us. He stands before us as the mirror image of who we can become. There is no aspect of our life about which he is not concerned. He calls us into our true selves, the ones made in the image and likeness of God. He calls us back into the beauty and wholeness of our original creation. Today’s gospel is as much about calling forth as it is about casting out. They are two sides of the same coin.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The true voice and the true image are always present. That's why the man with an unclean spirit can cry out, **"I know who you are, the Holy One of God."** He speaks from a deep place of knowing. His recognition of Jesus is at a profound level a recognition of himself and his holiness. For every voice that denies that and leaves us crying, **"What have you to do with us?"** Jesus says, **"Be quiet. That's not who you are. You are mine and I have everything to do with you."** Listen to that voice and you too will be astonished at what can become of your life. **Amen.**