

Wounds

One of the most common features in the gospel of Mark is an awful lot of talk about demons.

As you know, Mark's gospel is only 16 chapters long, by far the shortest of the four gospels; yet stories about demons show up 21 times!

So if we want to get inside some of the mysteries that Mark presents to us through his take on the story of Jesus, we have to deal with demons.

Mark's gospel begins with Jesus himself facing demons in the desert, confronting the alluring temptations of power, fortune and fame, and choosing whether that is the road he will travel, or will he travel the hard road of the cross?

Today, in his very first public act, Jesus frees a man consumed with his own demons, and soon we shall see him doing exactly that any number of times, in any number of places, freeing any number of people from their demons.

Okay, so some of you are looking at me kind of funny ... I know, we live in the 21st century.

Any talk about demons usually involves the newest Hollywood horror movie — or the latest halloween costume, because everyone knows demons don't actually exist.

Or do they?

Perhaps not as red skinned devils with horns and tails and pitchforks.

But what about the demons who are the remnants of past pain or past grief, the demons of evil given and evil received?

What about the demons of past troubles and shame?

I knew a woman who was sexually abused by her step-father for years, starting when she was 6, finally ending when she ran away at 12.

She eventually found alcohol and then stronger drugs, drugs like cocaine and heroin, that, for a while, provided a lifeline out of the unimaginable pain that such a brutal betrayal caused.

It is a most human response to deep pain to push it away, to lock it up in the recesses of the mind, to try to forget; yet this is always a losing effort.

The pain seeps out like sewage, coming from unexpected places and at unexpected times.

This hidden pain harms those who are near and dear, but it harms especially the one who is so frightened about bringing the past trauma into the light of day.

Only after reaching her own bottom, which nearly killed her, did she find, through courage and exhaustion, the help she needed; part of which involved going back, now as an adult, to those brutal childhood days, to face what had happened to her.

And what she discovered on that journey back into the horror — was her own demon.

She told me that this demon of hers looked a lot like the Wookiee — from Star Wars — you remember, the big tall hairy pal of Harrison

Ford; but unlike the movie version, this hairy demon of hers, well, it was not nice; it wasn't friendly.

It was vicious and frightening.

At first, she could only run from it, trembling and afraid.

But as she continued her recovery, she kept going back to where that demon lived.

She didn't go back alone.

Thankfully, she had the companionship of a wise counselor who went back with her, and as she kept going back, ever so slowly, the demon began to change — not in how it looked, but in how it behaved.

You see, ever so slowly, that demon was transformed from something of unimaginable horror and fear, of loathing and disgust, into something she began to love; something she could even embrace, something that came to be her protector.

And having faced her unimaginable wounds, why, those wounds became the source of her love and compassion and insight and ability to touch others who also have demons to face.

Facing our demons is unavoidable if we want to develop spiritual maturity.

Maybe that's why Mark puts so many demon encounters in our way as we make our way through his gospel....to remind us that if Jesus, the pinnacle of what it is to be human, has demons to confront, well then, so do we.

And so, from the earliest days of the church, men and women, our mothers and fathers in faith, went into the desert, alone, to face themselves, to discover the nature of their own demons, and then, having faced them, to release them.

We don't need to head for the desert to experience this same liberation.

The sacrament of confession, also known as reconciliation, was always intended to be that same sort of invitation to all believers, a chance to examine ourselves deeply, not to be morbid about it, not to beat ourselves up, but to take on a rigorous self-assessment — so that we might become free from the things that mess us up.

Which is why the powerful 12 step programs like AA and NA have Steps 4, 5 and 6, which, in a nutshell, ask the person to write down on paper everything they ever did that hurt themselves or others, to write down every bad act, every shameful deed, and then tell it all to a trusted person, and then, to let it all go.

Why go through such a difficult bout of self examination?

Because our demons, left to themselves, produce spirits that can and do invade our lives, and the lives of those we love.

Demons, left to their own devices, create spirits of jealousy or spirits of envy or spirits of greed, lust, anger and pride.

These spirits can and do control our lives, a fact that is often painful to acknowledge.

They lead us into actions that we deeply regret, shamefully recall, bitterly remember.

And these are not the only spirits with which we must contend.

There are spirits that infest our institutions and our collective consciousness.

Spirits that demand an eye for an eye.

Spirits that justify the grotesque accumulation of wealth by a few when the vast majority of our fellow human beings live in dire need, even in our own beloved islands, where nearly 40% of our sisters and brothers live on the economic edge, while 11% are in actual poverty.

Add to those the spirits of greed and arrogance, the spirits of demagoguery and fear, provoked to keep the few in positions of power, not to mention the startling increase in people consumed with spirits we once hoped existed only in the outer fringes of our community: spirits of white power and racism and misogyny.

These are the powers and principalities that St. Paul so often confronts; spirits that can blind us to the good life of compassion and acceptance and being content with "enough," which is what God intends for us on this earth.

So in his very first chapter, Mark tells us that in Jesus, we have a redeemer who is stronger than any of those spirits, a friend who is always ready to free us from our demons.

"Christ comes and shatters the domineering designs that shackle people to lower standards of life than God intends.

Christ comes to free us from the demons of prejudice and pride, of greed and guile.

Christ is among us, here in church, and there on the street corner, to demonstrate this saving power among us.

If we devote ourselves to anything less than God's divinely directed destiny, one that is free of demons, then we have missed the goal of faith." D. Lose. (paraphrased).

Coming face to face with our demons allows us to see that behind practically every angry word, every hopeless sense of insecurity, every fear, is really a wound; and a wound, once tended to, can be healed, and once healed, what was once a wound becomes a source of insight, of compassion.

The healing wound becomes a source of healing.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" the demon asks in today's gospel lesson.

He is here to bind up our wounds, he is here to set us free.

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