

## Know Your Place

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Third Sunday in Lent, Mark 7:24-30

“As our 21<sup>st</sup> century world grows increasingly diverse, it is often the polarizing voices dictating to us how we should view our neighbors, our interactions at work, our families, and even our race and ethnicities. Instead of sensing that the world is recognizing and celebrating our differences, we often feel separated from one another.” So writes Jodi Pfarr the author of the book we are studying together this Lent, The Urgency of Awareness.

Polarizing voices and actions indeed! Violence against Asian American women, remember what happened a year ago in Atlanta? And last week the school Board of Becker Minnesota officially invited “the other side” to come and speak against LGBTQ children. And how will history judge that moment, when, in a presidential debate of one of the oldest, continuing democracies in the world, a debate viewed by millions, when the president of this country, running for re-election, refused to rebuke, thereby tacitly accepting and even blessing, white supremacy and the right wing militia ? Or when this same president disparaged and mocked a reporter with a disability? How will history judge these unconscionable, unbelievable moments? Moments that unleashed the unclean spirits, the demonic forces into the land.

How will history judge? Harshly. Very harshly.

While the forces of caste and domination, those who think: “as long as everyone knows their place and how to behave, everything will be okay”, while these forces will always try to regain their foothold in history, that is, they will try to re-possess the spirit of the peoples; still, the liberation movements around the globe will never stop. Taking the long view now... It sometimes seems that every generation forces society to deal with a new group that has been historically marginalized, a new triangle in our Lenten book. Each generation fights to discard a piece of the cultural map, that deeply imprinted belief system that there’s a place for everything and everything in its place. It isn’t easy and there will always be martyrs, but the world continues to change. “The arc of of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice”.(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Just think! It wasn’t that long, when, in small towns in Minnesota it was forbidden, not legally but socially, for a Catholic and a Protestant to marry.

And I remember conversations, after the transgender choir, that Dorothy accompanied, first sang at Mayflower-- was it 15 years ago?-- two separate conversations with church office

volunteers, both older, white, heterosexual women. Cyrena Dierhauer said it was wonderful having this choir at Mayflower, as she reflected about someone dear to her in her small town while growing up who was gender non-conforming, though Cyrena didn't have the language for this. And Marty Struxness, with a sense of the urgency of awareness, asked to borrow a book from my clergy library about gender so she could learn. She devoured it in a week. Change is always happening...

Jesus was a change maker. He ushered in, and not in some vague, ambiguous, soft way, but boldly and clearly with his words and actions, he ushered in the Kingdom of God that erased the cultural map, the purity system of his time. In the Kingdom of God, everyone has a place at the table and it's a round table and you come as you are. The unclean spirits, those who were threatened by this kingdom of God arrangement, those who desperately want everyone to know their place and to stay in it... they get nervous when Jesus enters the synagogue or the town square or anywhere. They feel his power, and they don't like it. Not one bit.

The very first public thing that happens, let's call it the inaugural scene, in the gospel of Mark is an agitation. By Jesus teaching and by his mere presence, the unclean spirits, the demonic spirits, get agitated because they recognize who he is and he is a threat to their very being, those guardians of society's domination and separation system. The unclean spirit cries out against this one filled with the holy spirit. "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? We know who you are, you are the Holy one of God." Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit, the demonic, that has come in from the outside, in to inhabit, this person. "Be silent! And come out of him!" The unclean spirit clings so tenaciously to that human host that it convulses them as it is exorcised.

This inaugural scene in the gospel of Mark announces the conflict that Jesus stirs up, between the powers that keep things in their place-- society's domination and separation system, mostly subtly but still powerfully, normalizing one group over another-- and the powers that liberate everyone and lead us into a new way of being, the way creator God intends for us to live. Of course Jesus societal agitation is a threat to all the powers that be and he is the first martyr of God's revolution.

While teaching the leaders of our Lenten groups, Jodi, the author of the book, shared about an encounter she had with a 60 something, heterosexual, white, able bodied man in a position of authority at a corporation where she was consulting. She describes how she experienced his presence with her, a younger woman. Perhaps she, having done this diversity work in so many settings for years, expected him to be a certain way? But from the very beginning and throughout her time with him she felt seen, listened to, respected, and that she was given the space to be who she was. He neither under related to her nor over related, you know in that preening way... He had clearly done his inner work. Was it his wife, or his

daughters, or just his own calling to the urgency of awareness, but he had done the hard work; he knew his unearned privileges as a male; and altered his mind and behavior, thereby refusing to follow the social map that had been imprinted in him since childhood. He had arrived. He had done the work, when it came to women...

This church has done the hard work in the last century when it comes to women, so much so, that I have never felt disrespected as a woman in my role as a leader. Long ago this church implemented policies, such as the alternating of church moderator, male, female.... and then this church lived into these progressive policies. Fully. What about other groups? Have we done our work or are we still working on it? How do those of us who are LGBTQ experience Mayflower? And how about those on either end of the age spectrum, the youngers and the elders? Do you feel breathing space to be yourself? Do you feel seen and heard? How about we who live with disabilities, of the brain or the rest of the body? And people of color and other ethnicities? Do you always feel completely at home here at Mayflower? Like it's yours to shape into the future? And other identities too? Mayflower, what work do we need to be about in this our next century so everyone can feel at home?

Jodi's story about the man whom she admired, who had done the work, surprisingly, stirred up a deep memory in me, a painful memory....

I had graduated from seminary where the way had already been fully paved by women: I was second or third generation women in ministry. Also, our denomination, women had been ministers for a long time. In my home growing up, in college, and in seminary, I felt freedom to be me. So... full of dreams, good grades, success I headed up North, a direction in MN I've always loved to go, for my first ministry position.

It was there I had, what almost felt like an out of body experience. I must still have a bit of the feeling left in me, and this was just one or two meetings.... Think of people who are dealing with this kind of experience every single day of their life! It felt utterly bizarre to me. I was at my first clergy meeting, a gathering of Christian ministers from all denominations in Bemidji Minnesota. I was the only woman present but I was ready. And then! I was made to feel invisible. Not seen. I mustered the courage several times to offer an idea of work we could do together, and it was as if I wasn't heard. And then a few minutes later, a man would offer the same idea and it was taken up for consideration. I've never felt so disrespected in my life.

I don't know what would have been worse, this being treated as if I were invisible or being treated as so very visible, sort of given the special woman's chair, and them looking to me over and over for the woman's perspective, I'd have to be so self-conscious, compelled to speak even when I didn't care to. Invisible or in the center of everyone's awareness. Both sound painful and one was painful. Either way, it's them, the men, saying "woman, know your place in this our space!"

If they had invited me to pray, at the end of the meeting, would I have prayed for an exorcism of the unclean spirit of male supremacy? Probably not. This minister raised in a theologically liberal home and church and attending a theologically liberal seminary, had studiously avoided and even ignored these stories of demons and exorcisms. But who knows? Maybe the spirit of God would have gotten into me... and I would have prayed out... "Oh Jesus, come and exorcise the demonic spirit of male supremacy out of this space and out of these minds. There is no place for this distortion of humanity. Free these men of their dominance. Liberate them! These beloved children of God." But they didn't ask me to pray.

When the community gathers, I wonder, if the exorcisms are not for the ones on the margins and in the back but for the ones who are front and center, who feel that they are the norm and that the world is just set up for them, and they/we aren't even aware of it and so they/we perpetuate this unequal way of communing, mostly in subtle but nonetheless powerful ways. Not for those who may feel shame at their informal education level or their aging and disabilities or any number of human identities that are not considered the norm or the preferable but for those who don't see them as equals and don't know how to relate and so either pity or avoid or overdo it. Not for the ones whose triangles point down but those whose triangles point up and are clueless and continue to do damage to others and themselves. We are the ones in need of exorcism.

So stories have to condense time. This work of exorcism actually takes a long time. To repair the damage done by a social system that separates and oppresses. To return to God's dream at creation of the wondrous diversity of human kind living well together.

Lent is a season for metanoia. The renewal of God's people. A new mental outlook. A new way of being.

This Lent we're shining a light on all of this, this normalized dominant stuff, within ourselves and our church community. The truth of how things operate. The truth of our automatic thoughts. We're becoming more aware... Shining a holy spirit light on all of it.

They cry out, those unclean, demonic spirits that inhabit us. "What have you to do with us Jesus? Have you come to destroy us?" "You bet I have. There is no place for you. Be gone!! Come out of them!!"

### **Sources**

Pfarr, Jodi, The Urgency of Awareness: Unlocking the Power Within Individual, Organizational, and Community Efforts. MCP Books, 2019.

Schillebeeckx, Edward, Jesus: An Experiment in Christology, CrossRoad, 1985.



