

Purging the Evil Within

Mark 1:21-28

A little over a month ago, when Pope Francis addressed the Curia of the Roman Catholic Church at Christmas, the usually genial and somewhat gratuitous holiday gathering was verbally scorched with a scathing papal rebuke. Instead of the typical fawning sentiments of the Holy Father toward his boys in red, Francis lit into them with the wrath of God. According to one report, “To the Catholic Church’s ‘seven deadly sins,’ Pope Francis added the ‘15 ailments of the Curia.’”¹

Apparently, Francis’ tongue-lashing of these papal princes was long overdue. For years, the Vatican has been corrupted by all sorts of vices and legal transgressions, including serious concerns over sexual misconduct, money-laundering, and other illegal activities. Francis also let loose on more common moral failures as well, coining terms such as, “terrorism of gossip,” “spiritual Alzheimer’s,” as well citing the “ailment of feeling immortal, immune, or even indispensable.” Others indictments of these minor pontiffs, included,

- “being rivals and boasting;
- wanting to accumulate things;
- having a hardened heart;
- wooing superiors for personal gain;
- having a ‘funereal face;’ and
- being too ‘rigid, tough, and arrogant.’”²

¹ Nicole Winfield, “Pope Francis Delivers Blistering Message to the Vatican Curia,” www.huffingtonpost.com, Dec. 22, 2014.

² Ibid.

All of this was summed up in their need for a timeout in the confessional with a genuine examination of their consciences. Needless to say, when they came out of that Christmas gathering, embarrassed or angry, the “funereal faces” of the Cardinals matched the crimson of their robes.

To be fair, nobody likes to be scolded or upbraided in public, especially Cardinals, for as religious royalty, they’re supposed to be examples of heaven’s hopes for high ethical conduct. Their lofty standing in the Roman Church places them above such commonplace scrutiny, more suitable for the masses. It’s particularly unnerving for them to take it from the Pope, since they’re the ones who reinforce the notion of papal infallibility in order to keep the world looking to the Vatican for answers. So when the papal hammer comes down on them, how can they complain that he’s got it all wrong? The Holy See doesn’t see it that way.

Frankly, all clerics, including Baptist types, hate to be put in their place, in part because spiritual authority depends greatly upon people looking up to them (yes, there’s an element of ego here). Who’s going to listen if parishioners think we lack the divine imprimatur? So if the Pope considers the top leadership in the Vatican to be like the rest of us worldly miscreants, then no one will take them seriously. All these Cardinal sins could turn into a mass crisis for the Church!

I jest, but my point is a serious one. What the Vatican is addressing with its hierarchy is a serious concern for the worldwide church in all of its manifestations—Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox. It’s not merely a Christian concern; most, if not all, organized

religions are plagued with misconduct of one type or another, with the integrity of their institution and ministry called into question. Integrity and transparency, honesty and accountability, are foundational to any spiritual authority for so much of it depends on trust—trust in the care and maintenance of revenue and property, to be sure, but moreso, trust and care in the treatment of people of all walks of life.

What we've discovered over the years is that many of our beloved institutions in society cannot be trusted, as scandal upon scandal has diminished their integrity and public standing, resulting in an entire generation of skeptics, if not cynics, when it comes to believing in the purpose and value of basic pillars of civil society. It's sad, because all of us lose when even one or two incidents cause people to question the credibility of leaders, or require legal protections that are cumbersome and demoralize the rest who try to do what is right. As I learned growing up in Maine, it only takes one or two rotten potatoes to make the whole bushel stink!

The fallout of all this is that there is very little public trust in anything or anyone—nothing seems to be sacred anymore. No one is above scrutiny, or for that matter, scorn. There's a crisis of confidence in so many of our basic institutions (e.g., judicial, educational, financial, governmental, military, etc.), many are dismayed that public trust will never recover—will never be what it once was. This is a genuine concern.

Yet, we also don't want to return to a time when those with authority could deceive others and shield themselves from accountability, or abuse vulnerable people. Human beings are

notoriously fallible and manipulative, so to unmask wrongdoing of any type is one of the most important prophetic responsibilities any of us have in settings that rely on integrity and trust.

In many ways, this seems to be precisely what Jesus was up to when he launched his ministry in Galilee. I find it very interesting that he was constantly challenging the status quo—not to be a rebel or thorn in the side, as much as he was unmasking the powers that abused people, calling out those who did it with little accountability or cost. We find this not only in direct confrontations, but also when he was exorcising unclean spirits and purging the evil within certain people. That’s what our text for today is about.

Normally, when we explore healing stories in any of the gospels, we assume something different. We view them as revelations of Jesus being the Son of God, uniquely capable of exorcising evil spirits and healing victims from terrible illnesses and maladies. Modernist types, who don’t buy into the notion of demon possession, usually translate exorcisms as Jesus helping those with some psychosis or mental illness overcome their conditions, whatever they may be.

Yet, to be honest, Mark probably wasn’t making this point, especially since in first century Galilee, there would have been plenty of itinerant healers offering the same service, usually for a fee. Ordinary exorcists were usually hucksters, and it seems unlikely Mark would have entertained having his audience right from the start view Jesus skeptically. So what we likely have in these stories is Mark demonstrating something more remarkable about Jesus, which was his spiritual authority to unmask evil in the people and the settings he found himself.

In this particular story, it takes place in the synagogue in Capernaum where the scribes held supreme authority for interpreting the will of God through scrolls and scripture. This wasn't merely a scholarly expertise that scribes held over people, in an ancient, more superstitious, worldview, an interpreter of the divine message also possessed an existential power over people, which granted him a measure of esteem and status that few others had. One can assume scribes were normally honest people of integrity—who could be trusted for the most part; but as true today, there were also those who abused their roles and authority. As is often the case, when this unchecked authority is given to a human being, especially within well-trusted institutions like a synagogue, that person harbored a great deal of influence to control much of what people were to believe was true about life, God, and their world.

In the story we heard, an unclean spirit within a particular man cried out in defiance of Jesus' interpretation. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" At first, this might seem like any run-of-the-mill demon possession, which is how it is normally viewed.

Except, it's unlikely a "crazy" person would have been allowed into the sanctuary in the first place, simply because of the disruption it would bring. Most of the "demon-possessed" were deliberately kept outside of sacred places out of concern for defilement and disturbance.

So this unclean spirit was not coming from someone who was an outsider; rather, it was of a person who likely had standing in the synagogue who would have taken issue with what Jesus had to say.

Who could that have been? In all likelihood, it could have been a scribe, who didn't care for what Jesus was teaching, or it could have been the synagogue leader (now president), who had vested interest in keeping things as they were, i.e., maintaining the status quo.

In other words, it was likely one who took offense at what Jesus was saying and doing in undermining their authority. What transpired wasn't Jesus who was silenced, but instead the one who defied Jesus. That must have amazed (even thrilled) those who were there.

Keep in mind, Jesus repeatedly called religious authorities into account throughout his ministry, largely for the abuses of privilege and power that they exercised for their own selfish benefit. The most explicit example of this is in the seven woes recorded in Matthew 23, where he excoriated the scribes and Pharisees (which sounds a lot like Pope Francis' admonishment of the Curia). Jesus' denunciations of religious power and authority unmasked the evil within, which is why the unclean spirit in the man cried out—he had been exposed for what he was!

Mind you, it wasn't as if others hadn't seen questionable ethics and conduct in many of their religious and civil authorities, but Jesus may have been among the few who dared to stand up consistently and was willing to put his life on the line for it—John the Baptist being another example. Most people would have only complained among themselves and not tried to buck the system.

That's understandable; many of us put up with corruption and misconduct because of the price one pays for calling leaders into account. Anywhere you go, the system is set up to get you every time.

Abusers of any type are watchdogs for any kind of resistance. They're manipulative and clever and willing to do just about anything to protect themselves from being discovered or taking the fall.

This helps to explain why the scribes and Pharisees continually conspired to undermine Jesus and eliminate him, because he was a threat to the status quo—he was awakening people to the truth—to all the spiritual abuses and abusers they were suffering under—those who were controlling the system. This is what ultimately brought about the drama of Holy Week and, of course, Jesus to a disgraced state of death upon the cross. Death is the great silencer of critics—of whistleblowers and protestors. Anyone who tries to unmask the evil within institutions and those who operate within them, will pay dearly. That's why so many abusive leaders get away with their crimes. It takes a shakedown from the top to purge the evil within.

Part of the widespread distrust people have of institutions today stems from a weariness of seeing so many of them fail to live up to what they've been entrusted with. Granted, it's unfair to make sweeping accusations or to blame every person within a corrupted setting with moral failure. But the public trust is so fragile at times because those within a failed system who might have the position or power to make changes can't see how much damage has been done. They have mixed loyalties, because they've invested too much of themselves to get where they are that they become tolerant, if not protective, of the very system that has been corrupted. That's how so much evil and unnecessary harm remains unaccounted for, or glossed over, because the ones in the position to unmask it are too worried

about the cost it will bring. What are you to do with when you fear bringing the whole thing down?

For me, this makes the efforts of Pope Francis so remarkable and courageous. Being an outsider, Francis is able to bring a fresh perspective and can unmask the evil within the Vatican system, but being the Pope he has the spiritual authority to call it like it is and to hold accountable those who have done wrong with impunity. Even Jesus didn't have that political advantage. I hope Francis lives a long life with the same iconoclastic spirit that is making him into an extraordinary savior of the Catholic Church, if not in the faith of many.

I also hope that you and I can have the same prophetic eyes and pastoral heart to purge the evil within the institutions we depend upon—in government, in business, in finance, in civil society, in the military, in education, in our church, and even in our homes. When there is deceit, dishonesty, hypocrisy, malice, uncontrolled lust, selfish ambition, endless gossip, and anything else that destroys the integrity, character, and spirit of the places we depend upon and hold dear, whatever we can do to hold it accountable and to reform conduct, practices, and attitudes, then it benefits the basic trust we all have in life. It helps to restore hope that we can believe in good overcoming wrongdoing.

Purging the evil within can be a godsend for us all if we follow through and repair the trust that has been lost. Though it may cost us something in order to make it happen (a whistleblower, a crusader, a prophet, etc.), it could well be a price worth paying if we save potential victims from unnecessary harm. In the scale of life and its

troubles, it may be the only way to restore faith in the things that truly matter.

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