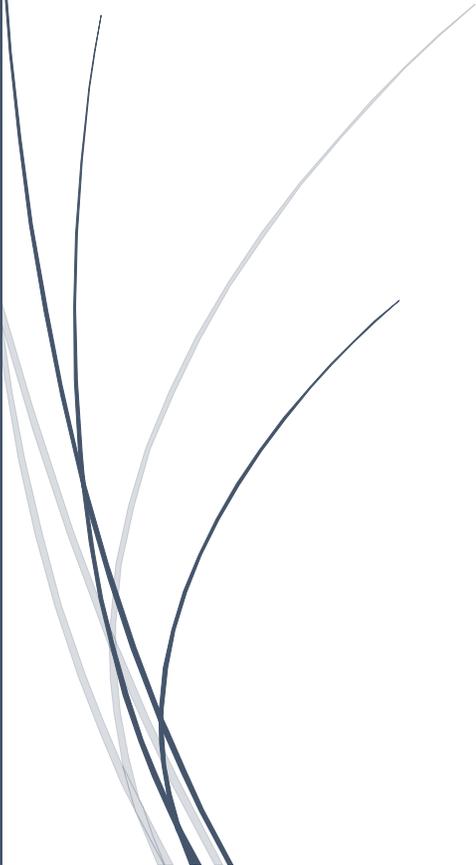




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Monsters...



Brad Walston

This morning, we find Jesus near the beginning of his ministry. He's rounded up a motley crew of disciples -- he's created his ministry team. So I'm thinking that this must be about the time the disciples start to ask questions about this guy that they've dropped everything to follow. Questions like, 'Who is this guy *really*?' and, 'Where *exactly* are we going?' 'Where are we going to *sleep* tonight?' Or even something really important like, 'When's lunch?' But it's the Sabbath, so before going to lunch they go to the temple. It's a good way to start a ministry, I think -- it's a good way to start the day; and it's Jesus' turn to preach.

Frederick Buechner once said that the most hopeful part of the church service is the moment the preacher walks to the pulpit and pulls the little chain on the lectern. We don't have a pulpit like that but you know what I mean; it's in that moment that the congregation waits for a word from God. Just maybe there might be a word for *them* today. Maybe they will hear something that will deliver them from whatever they might be facing that day, that week, that year. No pressure there!

I imagine that's just what they were feeling in the temple when Jesus got up to speak that morning. And whatever Jesus had decided to talk about, the congregation was 'astounded by it'- or 'amazed,' in some translations. I can imagine them talking amongst themselves (not during the sermon, of course!), saying things like, "Isn't he fantastic! He brings the scriptures to life. He makes it so *real* for us! He really knows what he's talking about - not like the scribes - but someone who really knows his stuff - with authority!"

And I don't know how long it goes on like that, but someone towards the back, maybe in the 10th row, behind the lady with the big red hat, starts to heckle Jesus! The text says it was a man with an unclean spirit, and over the years the tendency has been to turn this man, and this spirit, and in fact this whole story, into a scene that could come straight out of *The Exorcist* movie: The guy does that 360-degree head spin like Linda Blair -- eyes crossed, gallons of projectile pea soup... the lady in the big red hat is screaming... It's funny. But back up for a second. Let's look again. What if he's just a man -- an ordinary man in church, who happens to have an unclean spirit?

We need to look at what that means; what is an "unclean spirit." Some people say it was a demon. But because we don't believe in demons anymore, some of the scientific community say it was some sort of medical condition; that it was probably something like epilepsy causing convulsions as the man was healed. Others say that the man was possessed by some sort of a deviant *behavior* (I don't like that word, deviant -- seems so subjective) -- but some behavior that had started to influence and to overtake his life -- a behavior that had possessed him; the kind of things we don't like to talk about in church - something evil that

was waiting inside like a predator. In fact, when we think of it that way, it's easy to think of the spirit as evil, and then it's really easy to take the leap and just demonize the whole person.

But who was he? Could he have been a stranger in the church that week? A visitor perhaps? A monster who was walking by the church that morning and snuck in -- some dregs of society who managed to slip past the ushers somehow. It's nice to think that he wasn't a regular -- we don't want to think of our church family as having any of "those" kind of people, or that one of *us* could be... (perish the thought).

But let's for a moment say that this man was *not* a stranger. That, instead, this man was a regular - one of the congregation - one of the ones who wait in the silence of hope as the preacher approaches the pulpit to pull the chain -- part of the family, part of the beloved community.

Could *he*, perhaps, have been the one we spoke of earlier? The one that heard some word in the sermon, some truth that would deliver him? Maybe Jesus touched that place deep within - a part of him, a part of his spirit, something... unclean? And the unclean spirit cries out from behind the lady with the big red hat... "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

What have you to do with us? Us? And who is US? You mean all the people we are on the inside? You mean, all the *parts of us* who have come and gone during our lifetimes...

Who is 'Us?' For this man, maybe "Us" includes the precious baby asleep in the blanket who won his mother's heart at first sight; or the toddler in his first Easter suit, with collar all wonky; or the awkward teenager on his first real date. It's the cocky college freshman moving into his dorm room; and the insecure but hopeful interviewee trying to show confidence to a prospective employer?

You see, "Us" represents the new dad passing out "it's-a-boy!" cigars. It's the coach. It's the Rotary or Kiwanis guy. It's the church member. ALL those parts are "us" because they still live in us; and "us" have gotten very good at hiding themselves under the skin we live in. And so for this man, those parts -- those unacknowledged but still present parts all cry out together.

"What do you *want* with us!" he shouts, "Because in the midst of all the memories and hopes and experiences of *all the parts we are*, there are things we don't want to look at -- things that you just poked, Jesus -- bad things! And there's a darkness in here that we don't want to relive, Jesus, that you've just touched.

There's fear in here, and pain that I've bottled-up for years. There's anxiety and worry in here that I've pushed down and only let out when I'm alone -- if then. There are hurts in here -- some which were even caused by people I loved -- people I trusted." And the man starts to tremble...

And to be honest, most of us have these places inside of us. We are adept at managing them, organizing and cataloguing them like file folders or chapters in a book. We tuck them in with parts of 'us' that are more presentable, more amenable... preserved between the pages of our hearts amid the dried flowers and old photographs. Then we put them in a cigar box or a memory chest and we take our little 'baggages' and we shove them under the bed.

But like a child, frightened by shadows and things that go bump in the night, those memories, safely stashed under the bed, quickly grow into *monsters* under there, especially when the lights go out.

Maybe you know the feeling? When you say to yourself, "I'm so glad that's over. I know what happened to me was terrible, but I'm better now." Then someone brings it up when you least expect it -- when the lights are out so to speak -- and all of those feelings you swore you were done with, suddenly bubble up to the surface. And so we go to our little cigar box, which serves as an arsenal, and we drag out those monsters -- the hurts and the anger -- and they become extra resources for us with which to defend ourselves against the unexpected pain of right now.

It's not that we haven't tried to get it together. People often battle these things for a lifetime; going through all kinds of therapy and medications, and the wound appears to be healed. We're over it. But suddenly something touches that old wound. It flairs up again and we realize that we've been holding on to a little piece of it that still hurts all these years later.

We only do that because we have been hurt. We know what hurt feels like, and we don't want to go through it again. So if we can hang on to a piece of it, and bring it out just when we need it, we won't have to feel vulnerable with anyone. We don't have to feel like we will be left with no reserves, with no defenses in case someone tries to cause us pain again. It's understandable, and it's perfectly human.

The problem is, that when we cling to past hurts and past angers -- our resentments -- we lose the ability to be intimate. We can't open ourselves up to the relationships that we really desire, because those monsters, although they may have good intentions, come out from under the bed to stand as a blockade in front of us. Picture all the monsters, arms linked, forming a wall between us and those we want to be open to.

And those monsters don't just help us avoid intimacy with other people, right? They also keep us from being totally intimate with God. Because if we were really going to open ourselves up -- if we were really going to turn those things over to Jesus -- where they belong -- we would have to be vulnerable with Him as well. We couldn't go on pretending that we are able to do even one thing on our own. And where would that leave us?

Well, that would leave us dependent -- totally dependent on God. I'm not sure I like that -- dependence is scary; we don't like it. We like control -- we like to tell God, 'You're not the

boss of me,” and “I can do this by myself” (how mature...), because I’m in charge, and I don’t depend on anyone for anything.

Is it any wonder the man went into convulsions when Jesus was healing him? We don’t want to give up our monsters! We don’t want to give up our self-sufficiency. We don’t want to give up our defenses. And I will tell you that this isn’t a one-time battle. For most of us it happens over and over again, because most of us are only able to let go of one thing at a time.

I may have said this before but I discovered that the whole time I had my back turned on Jesus, he never left me. I say I found Jesus, but the fact is, Jesus was never lost – I was. Thankfully, Jesus never leaves us. The Holy Spirit continues to show me things in my life that I can turn over to Christ -- and even gives me the strength to do it. And if there is anything in this world that I don’t mind being dependent on, it’s Jesus – God with us!

And as unnerving as it may be to consider being that vulnerable and that open with anyone, remember: God already knows everything you've got, everything that has ever happened to you, and everything you are! And despite what you may think of yourself, God loves you anyway. And every day, Jesus sees us there, sitting in the tenth row behind the lady with the big red hat as we shout out loud or more likely, whisper to ourselves, "What do you want from US Jesus of Nazareth?" And Jesus answers the 'us' within us: “Silence, frenzied, unclean, spirit (as the hymn says)... I got this.”

“Quiet, you – this one’s mine.”

Jesus looks at our monsters – the monsters who have guarded our hearts so valiantly all these years -- and he says to them, “Come out of there; she doesn’t need you anymore; your services are no longer required, I’m here now.”

Jesus tells us, “I’m the one who can love you as you need to be loved, the one you can trust... the one you can depend on... and I will never leave you alone.”