

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

The Gospel | John 12:20–33

Date | Mark 3:20–351



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Early in life, I learned there is safety in numbers. With others around, help is there when you need it.

Living in New York, I found this was true whether I was blissfully anonymous, riding the subway, or practicing situational awareness as I walked home at night in Harlem. But it's been a while since being part of a crowd felt safe. Pandemic times have made crowds complicated if not downright dangerous.

Today's gospel locates Jesus squarely in a crowd, attending to the eager folks who press in, desperate to know God's liberating power in their lives. The action is so intense, the throng so dense, that Jesus and his friends don't even have time for a handful of trail mix or a quick swig of water. When they aren't mending bodies or recruiting helpers to aid their healing efforts, Jesus and his companions are casting out demons.

If possession narratives aren't your favorite stories in Scripture, you're not alone. Demon possessed people in the Bible are often chained and bound, controlled by others who turn a profit from their misfortune. Some of the purportedly possessed live in caves, on the fringes of society. They tend to speak in ways that make others uncomfortable. And the demons themselves often mouth off to Jesus whenever he sends such spirits packing, evicting them from their human hosts. Any time he does this, personalities, communities, and even economies get turned upside down.

Some readers of Scripture see demonic deliverance stories depicting metaphorical or spiritual liberation, rather than literal exorcism. However you approach these tumultuous texts, there is no mistaking Jesus' authority to restore mental and physical health, to rebuke real human abuses, and to dismantle structural violence in the world. Jesus is in the restoration business, bringing justice, peace, and freedom to people in the grips of oppression. And it makes the authorities uncomfortable.

Religious leaders come from Jerusalem to discredit Jesus, policing him like some satanic charlatan, duping the masses with fake magic. Their resistance to the Holy Spirit's presence, disrupting policies that serve principalities over people, shows the status quo is less than safe with Jesus around.

Jesus' own family is so worried about his safety that they stage an intervention to keep him from getting into deeper trouble with those in power. You can just imagine their hand-wringing: "When did his tone get so daring, direct, and even disrespectful?"

Why on earth is he messing with demons? He must have lost his mind!" (That last part, where folks call him crazy, that's actually in the text).

Jesus' parable about the strong man counters the demonization of his ministry by the religious establishment. His right-minded proclamation of Good News for the marginalized reveals that God, in Jesus, enters the commotion and chaos that often surrounds bodily healing and exorcising agents of harm. And God orchestrates holistic transformation of society, reintegrating vulnerable members of the community who formerly had been vilified, excluded, and estranged. God's family organizes around love's reparative power. That is where Jesus' loyalties lie, not with those who rule and are ruled by fear.

If you've ever found yourself in the cultural crosshairs of concerned folks who seek to sanction who you love and how you define family, you know the clear and present danger of such "loving" connections. In God's chosen family, inclusive love reigns supreme. And you can trust Jesus will let nothing separate you from that perfect love.

All our proud human habits of parsing "godly" and "satanic," "dangerous" and "safe," "strong man" and "plunderer," "sensible and insane," break down as Jesus unmask our hubris, ever inclined as we are to divide and conquer. The truth is, behind any strong man someone wants to tie up there's a resource somebody is fixing to plunder.

This reality came alive for me recently, in conversation with someone under correctional control here in Georgia. I learned about inmates working without compensation, providing zero-cost labor to lucrative private businesses owned by prison employees. I heard stories of unpaid workers fulfilling their daily assignments while contending with incessant tooth pain, hoping for future access to dental care that could save a decaying tooth rather than accepting the "remedy" offered them on the inside, where the only treatment available for cavities is extraction of the entire tooth.

Aren't such dehumanizing practices the very sort Jesus decries and dismantles? Even if we look at those rare times in Jesus' ministry when initially he refuses someone seeking out his help, Jesus ultimately is moved by their faith, audacity, and insistence, and moves toward them to compassionately meet their needs. This morning's gospel challenges us to see how we, too, often leave suffering people on the periphery deeming their plight beyond redeeming, how we pull away from societal struggles that feel too thorny for us to solve.

Educator, organizer, and advocate for prison reform in America, Mariame Kaba, sheds a light on the failings of Western systems of carceral punishment and deterrence that are simply too egregious to ignore any longer. With wisdom, compassion, and insight, Kaba explores how diverse communities are working to remedy underlying injustices and inequities that have made phrases like “school to prison pipeline” words we even dare string together in common parlance.

A recent New York Times article on abolition politics highlighted Kaba’s place within this movement that is fueling crucial conversations about necessary change within our nation. Kaba’s book of essays, entitled *We Do This Til We Free Us*, considers the conscious, collective, and creative efforts of abolitionists in America who are calling attention not only to the treatment of people held in cages of criminal confinement but also to persistent conditions that facilitate harms in communities of color and lingering mentalities that still perpetuate structural violence in our country.

These tender spaces of truth-telling and self-examination are sacred places we are commissioned to go with the Holy Spirit’s help, as Jesus opens our hearts to listen and to learn how God already is transforming our world, through the liberating power of Jesus’ love. Forging communities of mutual aid—mobilizing support so that individuals, families, and communities long targeted by policing, prisons, and surveillance can finally flourish—surely is part of our Christian mission in this time. Finding a faithful way forward amid the complicated crush of urgent priorities does not have to be dangerous or deadly.

God will help us with this healing project, reconnecting us as members of the wider human family and setting us on the path of rediscovering the “safety in numbers” we are meant to know in loving community. The sort of safety we have struggled to feel much lately. May Jesus forgive, restore, and heal us, one and all, so that we may embrace as essential to the whole beloved community, all who ’til now have existed on the margins.

Amen.

