

The Fourth
Sunday
after the
Epiphany

The Rev.
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Mark 1: 21-28 Epiphany 4B 2012

Of Idols and Demons

Well, as I confessed in the E Messenger this week, I was a little disappointed to be encountering idols and demons on the Sunday of our Annual Meeting.

I was hoping for soaring words from our scripture that will invite us to fly—you know those passages that teach us that “with God all things are possible” or “I will be with you always, even until the ends of the earth.”

Come on Scriptures, just give me something inspirational to work with, something to set our hearts on fire and call us to new heights in the coming year! So, what do we get instead? We get idols and demons. But, upon further reflection, maybe these selections of Sunday readings are just right.

We modern, intellectual types are not usually attentive to notions of idols and demons because the language and images we associate with them is so old fashioned. And of course the concept is so overblown by schlocky Hollywood movies that we run the risk of ignoring these very real perils to our spiritual and emotional health. As persons and churches we are still very much co-opted by these dangers.

It has been said that human beings love idols because humans are hard wired for worship. But, if we worship the wrong gods, we risk being seriously cut off from both a healthy reality and true knowledge of God.¹

Anything can become an idol. A nation, a political party, a charismatic leader, a rock star, cars, boats, alcohol, drugs, sex, exercise, money—even church and religion! You name it and we can turn it into an idol.

Most of these things are not bad in themselves and some are in fact good things. But once they become an obsession or our pursuit of them begins to create conflict by taking a place of prominence in our lives or communities that is out of order, it is then that we have created an idol and we are at great risk.

Idols are most dangerous perhaps because they often masquerade as harmless or even laudable in some way. And God does not exhort us against the little “g” gods and the idols we make of them because God is worried for God’s sake, but because God is worried for ours.

The little gods of our personal lives, workplaces, and churches are so threatening because they bring us into direct conflict with God’s desire that we be whole and healthy people and communities.

We know something has become an idol when it causes dis-ease, dis-integration, and dys-function. Any of the aforementioned “idols” can be God-things or “good things,” when kept within their “right-use-ness” which is the true meaning of righteousness.

Righteousness is that wonderful, holy state that is achieved when things are placed in their proper order and usage. More plainly, in the pastoral sense, idols cause us to suffer while God calls us to freedom and peace.

It is the same with those things which we call demons. Again, we must put away both the superstitious preoccupation with imps and devils and Hollywood’s spinning heads and green pea soup and look deeper.

As Richard Rohr says, “The real demons that get at us are very subtle.” And like idols, they prevent the heart from being free; they can turn us into bitter, cynical and unforgiving human beings.

Demons like pride, fear, and unchecked ego can destroy the human heart or our churches. Left unexamined these things grow quietly and undetected in the darkness of our hearts and minds for years until they literally suffocate our souls. Rohr, quoting Gerald Vann says, “We harden right into hell, we take on embattled and unforgiving attitudes and don’t even realize we have done it.”²

¹ From “A Time to Heal” A Report for the House of Bishops, Church of England.

² Richard Rohr, *Radical Grace*, pg 46.

I know back in October I shared with a couple of ladies at an ECW luncheon, that as I am growing older, working too much, and not giving my interior life enough attention, I worry that I am going to turn into a bitter, dried up old crone. I find I have to fight back cynicism tooth and nail.

I have seen the worst of people in both the world and the church and sometimes I fear I might lose the ability to see all that is really so true and beautiful and good in both.

Now, my wonderful lunch companions had the grace to deny that I could possibly arrive at such a fate, but I know it is real possibility—why should I be any different? My ordination cannot protect me from my own human frailty.

Many of you may have identified your own idols and demons—we all have them, in many ways they are a part of the human condition. The danger lies in denying the possibility that we might in fact worship idols or harbor demons.

When we remain in denial we are unaware that they are driving our decisions and behaviors they can become deeply destructive of spirit and community.

One of the most telling elements of Jesus' encounter with this demon or unclean spirit in the synagogue is it's recognition of who Jesus truly was. The others gathered there are impressed by him, they are impressed with his conduct, but it is the unclean spirit who truly knows the real source of the authority of Jesus. He is the one who cries out "I know who you are, the Holy One of God!"

This spiritual illness was hiding in plain sight. That is why our idols and demons are so dangerous, often they are so hard to see or detect. But these shadow squatters of our lives and community know health and wholeness when they see it and they often react violently to its presence.

Have you ever asked a friend or loved one who you feared was drinking too much if they thought they might be having a problem? Very often you will receive a violent, rejecting response to your question. That is that idol, or demon shouting desperately from the darkness for fear it has been detected.

Have you ever witnessed a faith community torn apart by a change in service times, a reorganization of programs, or even something as seemingly innocuous as who will use certain rooms at certain times? I hear about these things all the time.

When these things happen, you can be certain that there is something undetected in the shadows that needs healing and that the service times, programs or rooms schedules are not the real source of the pain that is surfacing.

But the good news is that Jesus teaches us that we are not helpless in the face of such things. We have the power to "cast out" our own demons just as we can "tear down" our own idols.

Going back to my own spiritual struggles with cynicism and its cranky cousins for instance, I have learned that I need to participate in regular Spiritual Direction. I try to stay attuned to those times and stressors that give rise to these shadows across my heart.

And often I look to others in my friends, family, and church to be a mirror to my soul. I can see in others when I am not my best self, the person whom God created me to be. They become tentative or they will say "is something wrong?"

If my response is calm, "no I'm okay, just busy and feeling a little frazzled" I know I am fine. But if I feel annoyed or become reactive and angry in response to this question, well then I know I'm living not out of God's light, but out of shadow. I have become host to some little idol or demon that needs attention and healing.

I know John Vice, as my senior warden for these last two years became an excellent mirror---I came to learn that if he began a sentence with "I hope this doesn't upset you, but..." that I was probably not my best self! It was a gift he offered me even if he didn't realize it at the time.

All of us have this ability; we share Jesus' authority to be people and churches in which idols cannot stand and in which demons cannot dwell.

I think that is something wonderful to celebrate as a people of Christ as we go into our Annual Meeting. When we keep our eye on those things which are closest to God's heart, and shape our private and corporate lives after Jesus' own, there is no challenge before us that is too steep, no division we cannot heal and no death from which we cannot rise.

We are St. Stephen's, we are God's people, and with God all things *are* possible. This year we are celebrating 70 years of worship and community. In those 70 years the people of God in this place have done amazing things, and yes the people of St. Stephen's have suffered the pain of brokenness and division.

Some parts of our history contain the very stuff of inspiration and other bits and pieces show a fragmentation that can make you weep with the futility and heartache of it all.

Highs and lows are all a part of our growth as a community of faith. In faith communities as in our own lives-- some of our best times are hard to remember while some of those difficult struggles, challenges and times---those times which we wished away or rejected----well they become the very foundation of the best of who we are. We cannot always tell in the present what is light and what shadow is; what is destruction or what is creation.

So our goal is not to avoid the difficult parts of being a faith community---we must not fear our idols and demons---that is how we give them power. Jesus teaches us that our hope is in living through our highs and lows as a people of love, reconciliation, and fearlessness in the face of any challenge we might encounter.

The Holy one of God is still very much alive and at work in us in more ways than we even imagine. All of us have a part to play---from the newest members to those who have graced these pews from the start---today contains a timeless question for us all: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

We have to answer this question everyday of our lives and decide to live in darkness or in light---St. Stephen's---I think the light of Christ becomes you! Through the power of God may you shine on and on and on. Amen!

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