

“Healing your own heart first”

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 28 January 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 4B

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13; Mark 1: 21-28; Contemporary Reading
from Mary Oliver’s poem “The Journey.”

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

Healing your own heart first.

Healing your own heart first is the spiritual equivalent of instructions given by a flight attendant. *“If an oxygen mask descends from the panel above your seat, secure your own mask before assisting others.”*

If you don’t have your own oxygen supply, you won’t be able to help others. Presumably, there is a real need for people to be told this. Perhaps it is particularly necessary for parents of young children, who are programmed to care for their offspring before they think of their own needs. Without our own oxygen masks firmly in place, and our blood supply and brains receiving nourishment, we cannot be there for others.

The heart is a metaphor for the spirit. Making sure that our spirit is connected to an oxygen source, is equally important, for spiritual care of our body-selves and the body selves of others.

We should not be making a choice between caring for ourselves and caring for others. It isn’t a matter of egotistically grabbing the oxygen for ourselves or of holding on to a spiritual path that says: *because I’m OK, everything is OK*. It is simply a matter of process. Oxygen mask on, then help others: healing our own hearts before we try to save the world.

And the healing - like the oxygen mask is a process. We’re connected to the source of life but we don’t just sit there enjoying the process of getting oxygen. We begin immediately to be aware of those around us, those with whom we are in community.

I chose the title for this week’s sermon “healing your own heart first” after reading the passage from Mark about the exorcism of the demon: my mind translating this ancient near eastern world-view of demon possession into a contemporary understanding of mental illness.

For those of us who were teens, or adults, in the seventies, it's pretty much impossible to read anything about exorcism without thinking about Linda Blair in that truly awful scary movie "the Exorcist." I think I was about sixteen when I saw the movie and it gave me nightmares for weeks.

Now, most of us are bemused - or appalled - to learn that some clergy still perform exorcisms, and that exorcism is a recognised rite in Anglican and Catholic churches. We believe that what looked like demon possession is most likely a form of mental illness.

But in this story Jesus tells the demon possessing a person to "*shut up and get out.*" As a response to mental illness, this would be completely unacceptable.

As I read and thought more about what demon possession actually means in this text, I began to realise that simply translating it into a metaphor for mental illness is not altogether helpful. There is a sense in which Jesus is speaking and acting toward the "possession" that is part of the human condition.

Ian Cairns, in his commentary, *Mark of a Non-Realist*, explores possession in terms of human psychology. Though he modernizes the idea of the demon possessed man by calling him mentally disturbed, Cairns explores the concept of "*unclean spirit*" in ways that speak to both those who we label as mentally ill and those who are labelled sane or normal (for want of better words).

Cairns says: "*On this basis a person's mind or spirit could be seen to be "clean" when it is integrated and clearly focused; where the mind which is split or lacking the ability to focus, could be said to be "unclean."*

The understanding of mind/spirit/heart, involves all of us. It invites us to think about what possesses us. It invites us to live intentionally in ways that will free us from possession, from ideologies and material concerns that cause us to become fragmented.

Two days after Australia Day – Survival Day - it invites us to confront ideologies of nationalism and racism. And it was so encouraging to see that confronting the possession of the celebration of national identity at the expense of black history is a demon that increasing numbers of Australians wish to confront.

I think of the phrase, when someone does something stupid, "*what possessed you?*"

What possesses us?

Demonic possession occurs when we are completely overwhelmed with the demands and prohibitions we encounter in our culture. It is the loss of self in a world that is overwhelmed by a culture of materialism and a drive for power. The self – the true self - is completely sublimated to imitation of other selves.

This story tells us that Jesus loosens the bond between the powers and our sense of self; that Jesus liberates us from our self-destructive tendencies. Demonic possession in this sense is very real, very terrifying and often very dangerous.

Healing our hearts, reorienting ourselves toward a sense of relation that respects the selves of others is our life's work.

So "*shut up and get out*" becomes not violent but strongly compassionate.

Compassion is the hallmark of Jesus' God. So Jesus' healings and exorcisms, which play such a major role in his ministry (even though they are quite embarrassing for post-modern readers) are about manifestations of God's reign on earth now, an in-breaking of eternity into time, a revelation of God's compassionate nature, a promise of the restitution of all things in the heart of the loving source of the universe.

Jesus' understanding of what he is doing is recorded in his claim in Matthew's gospel (12:28): "*But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the reign of God has come to you.*" God's non-violent reign is the overcoming of demonic powers through non-violent means.

This makes the concept of exorcism something very different from what was going on in that very scary movie.

Exorcism actually preoccupied the early church. Baptism was a form of entry exorcism, freeing the baptised one from the delusional system that had previously held them in bondage. Exorcism was not a rare and extreme intervention. It was the necessary pre-requisite for getting a "new mind."

Jesus' teaching is itself a kind of exorcism, a cleansing of the mind; a cleansing of the kind of misinformation that enslaves people to what theologian Walter Wink calls "*the Powers*." And faith is a healing of un-seeingness, humanity's trained inability to perceive God's presence even when it is happening before our very eyes.

This understanding of possession and exorcism gives us a way of connecting with the text and being enlightened and enlivened by it within our postmodern world-view.

The other point I want to make this morning is about faith community as the context for this healing. We are not called to sit alone in seats or our pews, sucking our own oxygen. There may be times when we really need to do this, to restore ourselves, to heal our own hearts from what possesses us. But this is not our end. Meaning and purpose become clear when we live in mutual relation and shared power with others in community.

Both the Corinthians text and the Markan text are about the worshipping community: the context for wholeness for those who choose to follow the way of Jesus.

The Corinthian text connects freedom in Christ and responsibility towards the community.

When Paul uses the word "love" or "agape" in verse 1, it has little to do with fuzzy feelings, but everything to do with the way we treat others. The word "respect" may be a better word than "love." Paul is pushing the worshipping community at Corinth to treat one another with respect – and with care.

As a worshipping community, we don't have to agree on everything. But we do have to treat one another with respect. Paul is echoing Jesus' reminder that all the commandments can be summed up in two commandments: *love God and love your neighbour*. Relate to the Divine Presence with awe-respect and treat other people (and we would add now, the whole planet) with respect. Yes, you are free in Christ, Paul says, but that freedom in Christ requires you to treat others (and the earth) with respect.

The Mark text too, takes place in the midst of a worshipping community. It is the Sabbath, and Jesus and his disciples arrive in the synagogue in Capernaum and teach. The man with the "unclean spirit" interrupts. Jesus says, "*Be silent, and come out of him!*" Shut up and get out!

Everybody was shocked, asking if this power comes from a new teaching or some new kind of authority. The shock goes to the heart of Jesus' teachings about the reign of God, the community of Christ, Christa Community, the community that is coming – and is here even now.

If understood from the perspective of empire, from the perspective of the powers that be, the answer is yes, it is a new teaching and a new kind of authority, and it is meant to undermine the "powers that be." The worshipping community will form around the reign of God and Jesus' teaching and power; and this power will emerge in the life of the community; from the life of the community.

Our texts this morning, pose questions for all of us: people who are fragmented and divided and possessed.

So, what possesses you? What possesses us? What possesses me?

I have my own list, I'm sure you have yours.

Thinking of a few of them, I would name my reliance on caffeine give me a lift when I need it and on wine to wind me down.

I would name the need to be in control – which a few of you probably relate to, knowing me! But also the fear of looking foolish; and the need to be busy in order to be deemed of value.

And then there are the grudges that I struggle to let go of let go of.

Thinking particularly about the last one, there have been times when I was unwilling to let go of conflicts and deep differences that I've had with another person.

I think it's so tempting to continue to poke at the bruise to help me remember the injustice; to keep looking for evidence to confirm my negative opinion of the offending person, to take some measure of satisfaction in my honestly earned anger and resentment.

Sometimes we no longer remember what had actually hurt us in the first place, but we know that we have been wounded. We become 'possessed' by the resentment.

We are called to remember that we are selves, selves in community. Each member of the community who grows in love and wisdom helps the growth of the whole community. All members of a community are responsible for their own growth and that of the community as a whole. So - connect to the oxygen and help others.

Jean Vanier of the L'Arche community taught about this kind of community. He taught that, when we are at peace, when we have accepted our own deep wounds and weaknesses, when we are in touch with our own heart and capacity for tenderness, then actions flow from our true selves and become a source of growth.

Vanier claims that true growth comes as members of the community integrate into their hearts and minds the vision and spirit of the community. In this way we choose the community as it is and become responsible for it.

It is my prayer that this may be so for Pitt Street Uniting Church in 2018, as we support one another to exorcise the demons that possess us, personally and politically, as we grow in humanity and in the community of Christ, in Christa/community.

So may it be.