

Evil Driven out By Love Incarnate
Based on Mark 1:21-34, David Jahnke, 1/25/15

I want to start at the end of today's passage. After healing the demon-possessed man and Simon-Peter's mother-in-law, the whole town gathered at Peter's house in order to find healing. So many needed help and hope and healing. And that remains the case today.

Two movies I watched this week conveyed this well. The first was called "Calvary." The movie opens with a priest hearing confession. He learns that the man he is speaking to was sexually abused repeatedly for years by another priest.

What gets into someone to do such a demonic thing; especially someone who at some point committed their lives to love and goodness and work in God's sanctuary? First off, mandated clerical celibacy and the false position that sex is solely for procreation are problems that the devil takes advantage of. And I look forward to the brave current pope and/or his successors continuing to address these evils as he recently did; and sooner rather than later, doing away with them.

Back to the movie-- in the confessional, the man told the priest that since all that was good and innocent died in him through the abuse, a good priest would die the following Sunday...the good priest he was talking to. So the evil exacted upon him had not been exorcised or healed. And he would now kill an innocent man.

Many others in the movie were plagued by evil and in need of healing. The good priest's daughter still suffered from the tragic loss of her mother and her father's taking off to become a priest at that time. A rich man glibly confesses his financial sins—but he eventually admits his profound apathy and sadness since his wife and children left him. A woman, abused by her husband, takes it out through drugs and an affair. Another man feels the awful pain of no one showing any interest in him, especially women.

It was a difficult movie to watch. But throughout it all, this good priest is present-- listening, caring, comforting' even calmly receiving the abuse that comes from these hurting people and speaking the truth.

His ministry brings a measure of healing. Toward the end of the movie, the cold and bitter rich man finally comes clean about the depths of his sense of detachment and the despair he feels because of it and his need for help. And the priest puts his hand on his shoulder and tells him that he has to meet someone. It is the following Sunday...but that he will stop by his house later and they will begin to sort of all of this out. And you can see the relief and the hope in the man's eyes that are tearing up.

The man's detachment and the re-attachment of this touch reminded me of Thursday night's small groups. We talked about how God's love has permanently attached itself physically, sensually to this world in the person of Jesus Christ who became bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh just as Eve was in Adam.

Jesus also came sat at table with the friendless and told them stories about God's inviting the lost and discarded to His banquet table in the Kingdom of God. He connected to them and showed them that God was their friend. And more than that, the parable of the prodigal son meant God would make them the guests of honor at the banquet table. God was not only a friend who wanted His love returned but a Father whose love could never be severed.

It is love that heals, period. In today's passage, Jesus went into a holy place to teach. And he taught with an authority that the people had never seen. When confronted with evil, he stood up to it and said, "Be quiet...and come out." Love incarnate freed the man and remade him.

On Friday I kept on thinking of the rich man in the movie describing his problem as detachment. And as I was looking for another movie to watch on Netflix when one called "Detachment" came up on the screen. It did not have the best reviews but I have this strange trust in providential signs so I clicked it on.

Well the movie was about a substitute teacher who comes in to what is meant to be a holy place—a school and teaches with a new authority. But instead of holiness, he meets demonic powers and principalities in students who are apathetic and violent in word and deed; teachers who feel at a loss and growing detached; in the despair of a life-long educator turned principal soon to be fired due to poor test scores.

I was a substitute teacher in Brownsville, Tennessee so I could relate. And I will never forget a day I broke up a verbal fight in a classroom. And when the bell rang, I heard a ruckus in the hall and I went and saw the same 200 pound girl pressing a girl half her weight into a corner and slapping her over and over again. I could not believe what I was seeing. We have so much healing work to do my friends.

In the movie, the sub follows Jesus' lead in standing up to evil with strength and peace and teaching the truth with conviction and passion.

Now this teacher and none of us are Jesus. So the healing we are called to takes time and perseverance and sometimes it simply will not work. Later in Mark, the disciples are sent out with power to do a lot of good but they are unable to heal someone who is possessed. And Jesus says that this one can only be purged by Jesus through prayer.

The teacher senses his own inability and gets to the heart of the issue during one of his soliloquies:

“We all have problems. We all have things that we are dealing with right? We all take them home with us at night. And take them to work with us in the morning. I think that helplessness— that foreboding of being adrift in a sea with no buoy, no safety net-- when you thought you would be the one throwing the buoy.” [from the movie Detachment]

I have been reading a book by a Harvard professor of Jewish studies about how creation's beginnings in Genesis are not ex nihilo— not out of nothing—but rather out of primordial chaos. The chaotic waters of creation are kept at bay as God makes a dome that separates the waters above from the waters below. This represents the safety net of God who alone, in the end, holds back chaos. [Creation and the Persistence of Evil, Jon Levenson]

But that primordial chaos remains a threat which must be kept at bay. It wants to break through the shielding of God, was the case with Noah's flood, in order to try and detach us from the love of God which binds all things together; detach us from meaning and purpose and hope by insisting on a godless, disconnected and solely material world. It wants dissolution and death.

The teacher despairs because he senses no ultimate safety net. But he throws his own safety nets out to the young in his classroom and beyond. And he should recognize that it is the stirring of the great safety net that leads this.

He met a young teenage prostitute used and discarded by the world again and again. And in the midst of his own stress and trials which could have led him to sin; to further pain and detachment and dissolution for the teenager, he brings her in to his home and binds her wounds with love and care, following in footsteps of Jesus who called women broken by an evil world into a new Life with him.

We are gathered now in Jesus' synagogue— his home. Here every week, we are reminded that God holds back chaos through His Word and the unity and mutual care of Christ's body extended to the world and alive and well in everyone committed to love and life and care and morality. Here every week, evil is cast out and wounds are healed by prayer and affection; here hope is restored as we remember the one who overcame chaos and detachment time and again, including the final detachment of death. So please turn throughout the week as well to the Word, prayer, fellowship, faith and service which keeps chaos at bay and sends us out to bind up the wounds of God's children. To the one who can do more in us than all we can ask or imagine; to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forevermore. And God's people say...

