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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Fourth Sunday after Epiphany*

*January 31, 2021*

*Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28*

I've been trying to imagine what it was like for the man in the synagogue who had an unclean spirit. He had come to worship at the synagogue that sabbath day to say prayers, to hear the Torah read, to listen to the religious leaders preach and teach about God and living in God's way.

But there was something different about that particular day. That day there was someone else teaching in the synagogue—someone with authority, more authority than the man had ever seen in a scribe. Someone whom this man, or at least the spirit who had taken control of this man, recognized. It was Jesus. And in the middle of the sabbath service, the man cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

Now there are two important things to note about what this man cried out. Did you catch that he used the word "us"—plural, to supposedly describe himself, a single human being. But what the word "us" really signified was that the man had two parts: one part who was truly him, and the evil part that was trying to destroy him. Those were two separate things. And Jesus clearly knew that: He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying, "Be silent and come out of him," and the unclean spirit convulsed the man and came out of him. And the man was left as he truly and authentically was—whole and at peace—just as Jesus himself had known that man to be.

The second thing to note about the evil spirit who recognized Jesus is that the spirit knew that Jesus had come to destroy it. Even the spirit knew that Jesus was the Holy One of God and that it was no match for Jesus. Lutheran theologian Craig Koester says that we often see evil as overpowering and pervasive and unstoppable. But from God's perspective, from Jesus' perspective, the reason that evil rages on earth is not because it is so powerful, but because it is so susceptible. Evil is desperate, and it literally and figuratively rears its ugly head because it is so lost, so frantic and so hopeless. But Jesus is so much more powerful than evil, with so much more authority to call out and destroy that which is not real, that which is not of God, that which is not truly *us*.

In the profession of faith we make at the beginning of every baptism and affirmation of baptism we renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God and the powers of this world that rebel against God. That's because in baptism, we are made truly whole, truly who God has created and meant for us to be. Those parts of our being that are not who we truly are—forces and spirits that tell us that we are not worthy, that we are less than who God made us to be—those spirits are renounced. And it is a lifelong journey, every single day when we make the sign of the cross on our forehead and remember our baptism, to claim who God has created us to be—beloved, true, wholly ourselves (w-h-o-l-l-y), made holy (h-o-l-y) by Jesus.

For the past few Wednesday evenings, many of us have been meeting over Zoom to participate in Dialogues on Sexuality. We read a chapter in preparation for each dialogue and watch a video with a variety of speakers on that week's topic and then and break up in small groups to dialogue.

In some of the videos and readings and conversations we are having we are hearing stories from those who identify as transgender. What those of us who are cis-gender—those of us who remain comfortable with our gender as defined at our birth—may not understand is that there are some people who in their truest selves are a gender other than the one originally put on their birth certificate. In our Dialogues on Sexuality we've heard and read about both clergy and lay people who for their entire lifetime felt a disconnect between their body and their mind—that they were not authentic and true in the body they had. Many of them went through immense struggles and rejection from their families and churches, and yet they testified to the power of Jesus to overcome shame and confusion in order to claim who God had truly made them to be.

Now you may or may not know that we have members of our own congregation who identify as transgender. And as dialogues around transgender identity and rights have arisen, I imagine for many of you this concept may seem confusing, or strange, or unbelievable, or maybe even sinful.

Well what I hear in this gospel today is that Jesus wants every single one of us to be whole and who we truly are. When there are spirits of shame and inauthenticity inside us that try to keep us from being who God has created us to be, Jesus wants those spirits out. I am immensely proud and grateful for the courage the transgender members of our congregation have mustered to claim who God truly and authentically made them to be. They have endured suffering, ridicule, pain, and even suicidal thoughts to come to the point of claiming the wholeness and belovedness that God intended for them. They have allowed Jesus to take away what is not truly them, so that they can live as who Jesus knows them to be: whole, authentic, beloved children of God.

Our transgender members are perhaps some of our greatest witnesses to the fact that Jesus is more powerful than the spirits who try to destroy that which is not real, that which is not of God, that which is not truly *us*. They have returned to what God promised to them at baptism—you are true, you are whole, you are unconditionally loved.

This may be the first time you have ever thought about transgender issues in a theological way. I imagine for many this is jarring and raises more questions. Please know that I am willing to dialogue with you (as are our members of our church who identify as transgender), and I have put a link in this post\* to a Ted Talk by a transgender pastor and her son who have lived and struggled through many of those same questions.

What we know is this: Jesus is more authoritative and powerful than spirits that try to destroy us. And like those we heard about in the gospel who were in the synagogue with Jesus that day, we, too, are amazed. Thanks be to God. Amen.

\*"The Story of a Parent's Transition and a Son's Redemption" Ted Talk:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/paula\\_stone\\_williams\\_and\\_jonathan\\_williams\\_the\\_story\\_of\\_a\\_parent\\_s\\_transition\\_and\\_a\\_son\\_s\\_redemption#t-289859](https://www.ted.com/talks/paula_stone_williams_and_jonathan_williams_the_story_of_a_parent_s_transition_and_a_son_s_redemption#t-289859)