

“The Hard Work of Exorcism”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren, Pastor
Peace United Church of Christ
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Most of you in this room this morning know that in my previous ministry I served a congregation that was located right smack dab in the middle of a retirement community. The name of that community was Uplands Retirement Village and was a UCC-affiliated retirement community, loaded with old people. When Kim and I and the family arrived there, it took us about a month for Kim to say, “You know, this isn’t really a retirement community. This is like a college campus for old people,” because it was like that. It was always busy. There was always something to go to, always someone coming to speak about some issue or whatever was going on the community, and it was a community of great busyness but it was, nonetheless, a community of older people. The median age when I got there was 78 years old, so, yes, they were older people.

After about a year of being there and doing many, many funerals (I think I did about 15-17 my first year there), I gave a sermon in which I spoke to the congregation and said, “You know, what we are doing in this community is we are having a daily dance with death — a daily dance with death. We are here at this community to live out the rest of our lives, to have fun while doing it, yet to acknowledge and grapple with this impending death on our minds”, so it was always interesting to be doing this dance with death.

One day I had a church member come into my office whose name was Marion. Marion said she needed to sit down and talk with me. Marion was an interesting person—a little quirky. She said, “Pastor, I want you to do my funeral.” I said, “Okay. I hopefully will still be pastor here when you pass away, and I would be more than happy to do your funeral.” She said, “Nope. We’re doing it in two weeks.” I asked, “Well, how do you know you’re going to be dead in two weeks?” She said, “I’m not going to be dead in two weeks, but we’re going to have my funeral in two weeks because I just bought my plot at the cemetery down the street, and we’re going to have my funeral while I am still alive.” I said “Well, all right, Marion. I’m not sure where this is coming from, but can you explain to me why we’re going to have a graveside service for you while you are still alive?” She said “Because I want to see what they say about me, and I want to know how many people come”. She is a little quirky, I told you. So, we made these plans to have this graveside funeral service for Marion at her grave site, with her present. She said “This is what we’re going to do. We’re going to have you. You bring your guitar and we’re going to play some cool old hymns, we’re going to sing, we might dance, we’re going to have food, and we’re going to have a keg of Heineken beer”. The day came, we sang good old hymns, we ate good food, and we drank beer and we said goodbye to Marion Zabel—a dance with death. Marion did pass away a number of years after that event, but it was such a stark event that it really made me think about life and the dance with death that we all do.

Now, in the scripture reading this morning from Luke, we are doing a different kind of dance, and it is what I want to call our daily dance with demons. In Jesus’ time, demons were seen as the source of most mental and physical illnesses. They didn’t have big institutions that psychotherapists dedicated to studying mental illness and physical illness, so they attributed bizarre behaviors to demons. Jesus, of course, is often reported to have freed people from demon possession. There is something going on in those stories that is not always said, it is not always reported in the scripture, but there is, nonetheless, some kind of healing that is going on there with Jesus imparting the healing power for those events.

The healing stories often are not simply about banishing demons, but in Luke and other stories that that, these stories of exorcism are really about forging a relationship with these demons. The demons in this story cry out for attention. They say “Leave us alone” and apparently there is more than one demon in this person, but it says “Leave us alone. What have you to do with us?” and Jesus talks right back to this demon power and says “Be silent and come out of him and show yourself. Show yourself. We want to see this demon. We want this demon to stop sabotaging this man’s life. We want

this demon to stop fueling our addictions. We want this demon to stop thrashing about for attention because demons call for attention". I am convinced all of us have demons. We have struggles in our lives. We have powers, pains and wounds that call out for our attention. They take many forms, but when our demons take many forms, what they are doing is revealing the wounds that we have and are revealing our deepest longings to be healed. We don't want to live in pain. We want our wounds to be healed. We want these demons to be revealed so that we can engage with those demons. Engaging with those demons is to have some sort of healing power over them. It is to take their power over us and to reclaim our lives when we can dialogue and identify the demons that are in our lives. It is difficult for us to engage our own demons.

I had a gentleman come into my office one time whose marriage was falling apart and who wanted to talk to me about it. I knew some of the reasons why that marriage was falling apart. I said to this gentleman, "You know, I understand that one of the problems in your marriage is your addiction to pornography". He said "Yes". I said "I know that your wife has known this for some time. She even knew you had this problem when you got married, but she was willing to work with you if you were willing to work with her". He said, "Yes". I asked, "Just how bad is this addiction? How much pornography do you look at?" He said, to my astonishment, "Five to six hours a day". I said "That's not just glancing at a Web site for a moment and clicking off. That's something very different. Are you willing to do the work to confront this demon and deal with it?", to which he said "You know, I'm 74 years old and I don't know if I can change". If we are not willing to confront our demons and acknowledge our demons and work with them, they will always have power over us.

The great psychotherapist, Carl Young, once said "It is only when we go into the depths of our own psyche (what he called "the shadow self") that we can confront parts of ourselves that we wish were not there, and if we can go into those areas of the shadow self, it is then when we can experience growth and transformation and healing in our lives". We must dance with our demons so that they do not overtake us. Scriptures, different passages, even the Psalms testify that it is not about ignoring demons. It is not about casting them out so we never see them again. It is really about identifying demons in our lives, identifying our pains and struggles, and keeping them always in front of us. This is, of course, the power of any 12-step program. If you are addicted to sex, to alcohol or to drugs, you go to those meetings and the first thing you say is "I am addicted". When you forget that, you get in trouble.

So, the message this morning from Jesus is about keeping our demons in front of us, always acknowledging our presence so that they can ultimately have very little power over us. Never forget your demons. The passage we read in Luke this morning followed quickly on last week's passage where Jesus confronted his own demons, so we are comforted to know that Jesus has been there. Jesus has walked that walk, and if we are willing to do the hard work of identifying and dealing with our own demons, healing can come into our lives.

Lent is that time when we, as individuals, and collectively as a church, and even collectively as a society, are called to confront, identify and engage with our demons so that they will not have power over our lives. Jesus' message is one of healing and empowerment and it is the good news of this Lenten season. Thanks be to God. Amen.