



University Christian Church -Austin

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## CASTING OUT AN EVIL SPIRIT

Mark 1:21-28

4th Sunday after Epiphany, b, Feb. 1, 2009

Few of us would question Jesus' authority to teach God's ways, but some of us do squirm with the idea of casting out an evil spirit. It sounds too much like superstition. We'd rather say that casting out of demons was not a miraculous physical or spiritual healing, but some inner spiritual reversal which freed the person from bondage to sin, to self-doubt, to destructive behaviors. In other words, much of the healing that Jesus performed, much of the authority that he exercised, was in the area of study that today would concern mental health professionals and psychiatry.

Does this mean that we should forget these stories and consign such problems to the secular medical establishment? Should we in the church believe that our faith in God has nothing to do with our physical health or our emotional health?

Of course not! The Bible clearly testifies that Jesus casts out evil spirits by the power of God. And in Jesus' name, we are called on to cast out evil spirits, too! But don't think I've flipped. Give me a hearing.

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Let us begin to consider this issue by facing squarely what modern medicine is only beginning to learn: that we human beings are an inescapable unity of body, mind, and spirit. We are not some robot with interchangeable parts that can be fixed like an automobile. What harms the body affects the mind. What harms the spirit affects the body. What aids the mind's development adds to possible spiritual

growth. All these aspects of ourselves are related intimately. Our thoughts can make us sick or well.

Anyone who has ever worried oneself up to a stomach ulcer know that it is true.

Let me suggest for your consideration a point that I absolutely believe: GOOD RELIGION, HEALTHY RELIGION, HEALS THE BODY, AND THE MIND, AS WELL AS THE SPIRIT.

Of course we have to approach this subject with care. We are not advocating replacing medicine with so-called "faith-healing". This is a field where so much damage has been done by spiritual quacks that many responsible people of faith are even afraid to approach the subject. Even as great a man as Mahatma Gandhi was guilty of a grievous error in this regard. Gandhi's wife was severely ill with pneumonia and was fading. Gandhi refused to let her have penicillin, arguing that alien substances should not be introduced into the body. Accordingly his wife died.

It is no lack of faith in God to use medications such as penicillin. Most medications used responsibly are truly gifts of God. Think of the suffering we would know in our lives were there no antibiotics such as surely saved Dorman Winfrey's life last week and multiple times last year. Think of the numbers of us just within our church who have now longer, better lives because of insulin to control diabetes; blood pressure medications; diuretics for heart problems; statins for cholesterol. And we could go on!

Good health is God's intention for our life. Often proper medication helps fulfill God's designs for us.

Sometimes the greatest enemies our bodies have are our own destructive habits. We know, for example, that vigorous aerobic exercise several times a week will add three years to our life. Excessive worry or stress can subtract those three

years, plus one more. Smoking more than 2 packs of cigarettes a day will cost us eight years. Being too overweight burdens our hearts. And I could go on, but I suspect most of us are feeling sufficiently chastised! Right?

We need to remember, that as First Corinthians 6 teaches us,

"... do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?

For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body." [1 Cor. 6:19-20]

Therefore, first, we must not mistreat these fine temples we are given -- or should I say, loaned.

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And not only is trust in God good preventive medicine, there is evidence that there is healing power in faith for our bodies even after they are in some way diseased. Some people when they are given bad news by a doctor immediately cave in and resign themselves to a pitiful, pity-filled fate.

Such would have been the temptation of famed author Norman Cousins when his doctor reported that he had contracted Marie-Strumpell's disease, that is, ankylosing spondylitis. The doctor confessed he had never witnessed a single recovery from this ailment.

Immediately Cousins embarked on a program of combining massive doses of Vitamin C with a program of daily laughter. He began with funny films shown on his own projector. Among them were "Candid Camera" episodes and some Marx Brothers' films. "I made the joyous discovery", he relates, "that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me two hours of pain-free sleep." He repeated the procedure as needed. Within months he was free from

pain and able to return to his work.

Like Norman Cousins we do well not to give in easily to illness. A key feature of victorious human living derives from our readiness to resist when some dark future or power appears before us. A person of faith, faith in God, does not quickly give in to the negative power of any adversary, be it physical or psychological. Like Jacob by the River Jabbok, we are to wrestle that disease, and wrest from it a blessing. The blessing is always there, to those willing to wrestle for it.<sup>1</sup>

For example, I'm sure many of you read in yesterday's Statesman the touching commentary by Leonard Pitts of the Miami Herald. It told of what could only be classed a demonic attack in Kandahar, Afganistan of 15 girls who had the bad fortune of being caught going to school by Taliban men who think that girls shouldn't be educated. So the men threw acid on the girls' faces to teach them the lesson – stay home.

What should they do? Stay home for fear of another attack? Hide from the world in an even more pitiable retreat from the danger? No! Those girls when healed up enough, went back to school to make something better of their lives. They took the risk of more pain, more hurt in order to live out their potential to the fullest. May God grant those girls the continued strength to persevere, and in doing so, find a healing that is more than just physical.

Because besides helping heal us physically, GOOD RELIGION, STRONG FAITH ALSO HEALS THE EMOTIONS. All of us sometimes reach the breaking point emotionally. We are sick, weak, worn-out even when our bodies seem fine.

There is a story about a monastery in Europe perched high on a cliff several hundred feet in the air. The only way to reach the monastery was to be suspended in a basket which was pulled to the top by several monks who pulled and tugged with all their strength. Obviously the ride up the steep cliff in that basket was terrifying.

One tourist got exceedingly nervous about half-way up as he noticed that the rope by which he was suspended was old and frayed. With a trembling voice he asked the monk who was riding with him in the basket how often they changed the rope. The monk thought for a moment and answered abruptly, "WHENEVER IT BREAKS".

There have been times in my life when emotionally I have been suspended in that basket. How about you? I think most of us come to that moment at some time in our lives, when emotionally we are on the raw edge and we feel uncomfortably out of control. The trouble is that many of us would rather die than show and share our emotions.

This being Super Bowl Sunday, you may see the same thing take place in today's game. John Madden says that some professional football players won't have an injury treated when anybody else is around because they are afraid it will be seen as a sign of weakness, or that the other team's players may find out and try to take advantage of them. Quarterback Kenny Stabler of the Oakland Raiders was like that, Madden says. So was the legendary Jim Brown, who would treat himself at home after a game, rather than let even the team's trainer know that he was hurt.

And even if we might excuse the fears of a professional football player, it is really sad when any one of us is afraid to share her- or maybe more likely- his hurts and pains and fears, because admitting our brokenness & need for help is usually the first step towards our healing.

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As the big game hits the TV screen this evening, I'll be rooting for the Pittsburgh Steelers, more out of nostalgia than anything else. But if the Arizona Cardinals win, I'll not be too upset, particularly if it was because of the play of their quarterback Kurt Warner.

Some of you know the story of how Warner courted and married his wife, Brenda, in 1997, even though she was already the mother of two children, one of whom had miraculously survived being dropped by his biological father. Little Zachary was born in 1987 and that fall left him with severe brain damage, retinas in both eyes ruptured, and so much more. Few thought he would live, fewer yet that he would ever be able to the walk or talk, which, yes, he now does. But even with these handicaps, Kurt Warner came to love this boy enough to joyous commit his future to him.

Both Zachary and his dad, Kurt, are examples to you and me of what a faithful, God trusting spirit can become if we are willing to strive against those conditions and the spirits that seek to overcome us.

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Our relationship with God is critical in the healing process. Carl Jung, one of the greatest psychotherapists of our century, stated that every case he had encountered in his many years of practice boiled down to a religious problem-- a problem of trust, or of finding meaning in one's life.

So central is our trust in God and its effect on the way that we look at life, that if attitude is right and our attunement to God proper we're simply going to be fine. Nor can any disease- even should it prove physically fatal- overcome our inner victory in Christ. You may say that statement is too strong. But I stand by it. We cannot fail to be the ultimate winners, if we keep our eyes on the goal and the upward calling of Christ.

As the Apostle Paul said in Romans 8:

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our

Lord." [Rom 8:38-39]

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