Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Columns
Spirituality



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"Jesus sent them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits."

What were those "unclean spirits?" In the context of the first century, the category apparently included afflictions like demonic possession, mental illness, and perhaps some sorts of compulsions. Today, we have differing views about demonic possession and place great trust in the helping professions to support people with mental illness and addictions. Has Jesus' style of mission become obsolete?

In Jesus' times, something "unclean" was unholy: not positively evil, but incompatible with knowing and enjoying the presence of God. Today we might identify a great number of attitudes that fit the category of unclean spirits. Last week's Gospel highlighted the incapacity/unwillingness to hope in God's reigning. Other dispositions that fit the bill include cynicism, deceitfulness, passivity in the face of physical or psychological violence, or indifference to the plight of people who suffer. These attitudes cause genuine harm to others and ultimately kill the human spirit of the very people who nourish them. Obviously, Jesus' mission is needed at least as much now as in ancient times.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 14, 2024

Amos 7:12-15
Psalm 85
Ephesians 1:3-14 or 1:3-10
Mark 6:7-13

Who is supposed to carry it out? As Mark tells the story, Jesus sent "the Twelve," a group that symbolized the chosen people. Christ's mission belongs to all believers.

Once we figure that out, Amos might drop by to give us a warning. Like many others, Amos never applied for the job of prophet. Chosen without being consulted, he was commissioned to speak God's challenging word to the leaders of his people. Their response? "Go home!" Amos ended up standing in for God as the brunt of their anger and rejection. If today's disciples would ask, Amos would let them know that the minute they begin to deal with unclean spirits, somebody will pin a bullseye on

them. That's the risk assumed by anyone who carries out Christ's mission.

In reality, nobody chooses this. As St. Paul reminded the Ephesians, we didn't start this; God chose us to manifest "the glory of God's grace." That glory, of course, is God's reigning among us. We must make no mistake; the task belongs to God who chooses people according to their abilities to continue Jesus' mission.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul leads us into a deeper reflection about what it means to be chosen for Christ's mission. He says, "before the foundation of the world, God chose us to be holy . . . adopted us in Christ and [let us know] the mystery" of God's own hopes for the world. By creating, God began the long process of evolution that has led to us, human creatures who can choose to accept or reject God's offer of fullness of life. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus reveal our potential to know union with God.

> [Mark] tells us of the mission of the Twelve because it is our mission as well.
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Paul proclaims that we are blessed "in Christ." That little phrase refers to the profound way God has chosen to be present and share divine life with us. The Incarnation expresses God's desire for union with us "in Christ." Christ has invited us to be active members of his body, allowing his grace to empower us just as the Father empowered Jesus. We live "in Christ" as we carry on his mission just as really as when we receive the Eucharist that impels us into that mission. ("Do this in memory of me.")

Obviously, Mark didn't tell us about Jesus' missioning of the Twelve simply to give us a history lesson. Mark called his Gospel "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ." He published the beginning so that it would be carried on. He tells us of the mission of the Twelve because it is our mission as well.

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Interestingly, Mark says that the disciples had authority over unclean spirits, but he tells us nothing of the content of the disciples' preaching. Instead of a script, Mark

describes their mode of travel. They needed sandals and a walking stick to be ready for a long journey, but they were to take no material or financial provisions. They were going out as vulnerable as our God who offers a love that can never be imposed.

The only task Jesus defined for the disciples was to drive out unclean spirits. Like them, our baptism commissions us to help others know and enjoy the presence of God — in spite of and in the midst of tragic situations and relentless attitudes that obscure our vision of what God wants for our world.

If this mission sounds impossible, Amos and Jesus would say that's OK. It's not ours to make it happen, we can only announce the possibilities in deed and word. And that's enough to expel unclean spirits.