



The Westminster Pulpit

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church
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“In the Name of Jesus” **Sermon on Mark 9:38-50**

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The theme: “Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” In our passage today, we will discover disciples who think they have cornered the market on what it means to serve the Lord, only to discover they’re not even close.

Mark 9:38-50

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

"For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

I don't know about you, but I have never made an appointment on my calendar to cast out a demon. Closest I have ever come was at a middle school retreat with a kid named Michael Pierce. I remember his dad being way too happy to see him getting on the church van. I called it, "Six Days with Lucifer." But as it turned out with Michael, it was more about hormones than it was about demons. Eight months later he grew out of it. I suspect he has kids of his own today, a teenage son, I hope.

This is all to say, "casting out demons" is not in our day-to-day experience.

But in the first century, the demonic forces existed everywhere, and they continually effected people lives.

Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, wrote about demons "causing frenzy, suffocation, strangling." The demons were an outside force that would slither secretly past any human defense, clasping on to a good soul and infiltrating the blood stream with a poison that would ignite a war between mind and body, disfiguring personalities, torturing the soul. An individual would become unrecognizable to family and friends. Twisted and distorted, violent like a cancer, it could kill the very thing it latched onto to give life.

"Teacher," John interrupted, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." In the first century, demons were everywhere, and thus, it became very easy to label anyone who didn't look like you, didn't think like you, didn't act like you, as someone who had a demon.

And so it was that no one ever looked differently, thought differently, acted differently than John the Baptist. And so it was that Jesus once had to say to the Pharisees, "...John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine. And you say he has a demon." (*Luke 7:33*)

And so it was that no one ever looked differently, thought differently, acted differently than Jesus. The scribes said of Jesus, "He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons, he drives out demons." (*Mark 3:22*)

Do you see?

Jesus cares for people on the sabbath... and people say he has a demon.

He has mercy to those racked by sin... he has a demon.

He touches people you weren't supposed to even come near.... he has a demon.

He lives humbly and can't be bought.... He has a demon.

Once there was a man with a demon, who lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains, he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. And Jesus saw him and said to him, "come out of him...". And the demons flew and entered

into swine, a herd numbering 2,000, and they rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned. And the people came to see what had happened, and saw Jesus and the man sitting there, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid, and begged Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

Leave! Leave! Leave! It is easy to label anyone who doesn't look like you, think like you, or act like you, as being demonic. And they said, "Leave, leave, leave," and took Jesus out from the city walls to the dump, and there they nailed him to a cross. I suspect they thought he had a demon.

In the first century, people saw demons everywhere, and they did some pretty stupid things. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." "We tried to stop him." By the ninth chapter in Mark's Gospel, the disciples can't seem to get a win. It wasn't always that way. Early on in Mark's Gospel, Jesus empowers his disciples to go forth with good news and cast out demons.

Success is all they have! But, as the crowds grow, success goes to their heads. They begin to argue with one another as to who is the greatest. They wonder who will sit on the right side of Jesus and who will sit on the left. They are so empowered by their own grandeur that they lean not into the power of God anymore, but into their own egos. So when a woman brings her son to them, a boy who is tortured by a spirit that seizes and dashes him down, grinds his teeth, makes him rigid and foaming at the mouth, she says to Jesus, "I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." And our Lord doesn't know what to do but to sigh and groan! "You faithless generation, how long must I be among you?"

When the followers of Jesus are all about themselves, they have no understanding. They have no direction, they have nowhere to turn, they have no power, because they are all about themselves. John interrupts Jesus and says, "Teacher...". Those closest to Jesus don't know who he is! Jesus isn't only a "teacher". Jesus is the "Son of God." "We saw someone casting out demons in your name." In other words: we saw people being unchained and set free in your name. We saw goodness being done in your name. We saw healing being done in your name, freedom in your name, peace in your name, and we tried to stop him... we tried to stop him... because he was not following us.

Following us? You see, they're so into their own egos. It's following Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It's taking up our cross and following him. Following us? People who argue with one another about who is the greatest? People who are all about arguing who will sit where? Following us? People who are all about counting how many followers they have? Following us? Jesus isn't interested in people who follow themselves. Jesus is looking for a few people who can exorcise the demons out of this world in the name of Jesus.

A few weeks ago I was sitting on a folding chair in a parking lot behind Hillwood High School. An odd place to find a seat, I know. I was there for the dedication of a store that was inside the school. Hillwood is a fine school with sharp students, but apparently for some of them, there is a need for a place to pick up school and medical

supplies, clothing, or food. They don't have any food to eat, they don't have coats or medical supplies. They set up a store for those who don't have.

So, there I was, sitting on a folding chair in a parking lot behind Hillwood High School. Behind me were some refrigerator-freezers plugged in and humming away, there in the parking lot. They were filled with food and drink, so that at any given time, day or night, someone who was hungry could take a quart of milk, put it in their backpack, and not have to go thirsty or hungry.

In front of me was Michael Oher. You may not know who he is unless you watched the movie *The Blind Side*. The once-homeless kid in Memphis, with a desire to succeed, saw playing football as the answer. He was adopted by a family and made his way to play for the Baltimore Ravens and on to being a Super Bowl champion.

Michael Oher spoke about how it was when he was a kid. Sometimes, he was so hungry at night he would drink bowls of water, five or six bowls of water, just to stop the hunger pains so he could get to sleep. He told us that the portrayal of the convenience store manager in the movie wasn't entirely accurate. Michael said, "The manager, in real life, knew that I was stealing food because I was hungry, so he let me do it." As wrong as it was, because as right as it is, no child should be hungry, not in this country, not anywhere. You don't want to make a child stumble, better a millstone be cast around your neck and you be cast into the sea. He said he met that manager again years later at the Memphis airport, embraced and thanked him for saving the life of a child. "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him."

Michael said, "When I became a success, people said to me, "You're a miracle. You're a miracle." He said, "If I'm a miracle, we need less miracles." Jesus doesn't need people who sit around looking for followers and thinking that they're great. Jesus needs people who will see the demons that people are up against in this world – people who have no friends, no hope, no life. Look around you and see these people as children of God, and see what they're up against. What keeps them up at night? What keeps them from living? What is it that makes a child cry at night? And then, in the name of Jesus, cast the demon out.

It would be a shame if there were people singing songs, praying prayers, and fighting about politics and masks, or wondering if they can make budget, while at the same time there are people who on Sunday morning, are putting a quart of milk and some cheese and bread in a refrigerator for someone who is hungry. Looking every bit like the name of Jesus. "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him."

Look at the cover of your bulletin. This is just a very thin slice about how we are in this world, in the name of Jesus. Casting out all those things that are against people, and saying in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord is with you, always with you. This is who we are, followers of Christ. As for me and my house, I – we – Westminster, will always, always choose to serve the Lord.