

Casting Out Demons?

Pondering Questions: Part 3 “Casting Out Demons?”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – September 4, 2022

13th Sunday After Pentecost

Readings: Matthew 10:1, 5-11; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 10:1, 17-20

Reflection: Psalm 3

Greeting: The Lord gives wisdom, from him comes understanding. The Lord stores up sound wisdom for the upright. He guards the path of justice and preserves the faithful. Let your wisdom enter our hearts and minds, O Lord! (*Proverbs 2*)

Prayer: O God, keeper of wisdom and understanding, you have brought us together into your presence this day. Grant us grace to worship you as we seek your blessing and your knowledge. Help us to grow in heart and mind with you, Lord. Build us up in your spirit so that we may know your love and be strengthened by your righteousness. Help us to be bold in our faith so that we may do your will joyfully and eagerly. May we worship you in a spirit of truth, that we may follow you all the days of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 3

O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to me, “There is no help for you in God.” But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head. I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me. I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. Rise up, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked. Deliverance belongs to the Lord; may your blessing be on your people!
(*Psalm 3 NRSVue**)

We read the words of Psalm 3 and hear of God as our shelter. That even when we are faced with difficulty, God is there for us. That God delivers us from harm. That we should always turn to God for assistance. How do you turn to God in your everyday life? How do you reach out to others in the name of Christ? How can we share God’s love to help protect others? How does sharing love bring you closer to Christ? How can we celebrate God’s love as a community? How do we turn to God when we are unsure of where to go?

Prayer: O God, you are our hope and our praise. Help us to seek your wisdom in all that we are and do. May we be strengthened by your steadfast love and faithfulness as we come before you in prayer this day. Help us Lord, that you lift us up in both our joys and our sorrows. Be with us in both our laughter and our tears. May your light guide us and lead us to life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Matthew chapter 10 verse 1 and verses 5 through 11.

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff, for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. (Matthew 10:1, 5-11 NRSVue)*

Our next reading for today comes from Mark chapter 16 verses 14 through 18.

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table, and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved, but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:14-18 NRSVue)*

Our final reading for today comes from the gospel according to Luke chapter 10 verse 1 and verses 17 through 20.

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. Indeed, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:1, 17-20 NRSVue)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I got a question about casting out demons and I ended up going down quite the rabbit hole in order to have some kind of answer. Mostly because this question isn't one that I had ever gone in depth into before. The question was about whether or not Christians are still called to cast out demons. What ended up happening was a large exploration of the appearance of demons in Scripture. Now, you may have noticed that all of our readings for today come from the New Testament, and more succinctly from the three Synoptic Gospels. And there's a reason for this. The biggest reason is that those are the three main places that we will find anything about demons in all of Scripture. And this alone took me by surprise. I found this out because I began looking through all of the Bible for the appearance of demons. There are different ways to count, and I can go into my methodology in detail if you are interested. However, what I found is that there were about six places in the Old Testament that get translated as a demon, but they almost universally refer to spirits or other gods, with none of them quite matching the New Testament's demons. And there was not really anything in the Old Testament that mirrored the casting out of demons that we find in the Synoptic Gospels.

Now the reason I keep mentioning the Synoptic Gospels, is because of another interesting thing that comes from researching this question. Jesus doesn't cast out demons in the Gospel of John. Which may be surprising, because John is full of signs. But we simply do not see the casting out of demons in that Gospel. John mentions demons, but every reference is people accusing Jesus of having a demon. The majority of the rest of the mentions of demons in the New Testament come from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Synoptic Gospels. They make up around 80% of all mentions of demons. Another thing that makes counting a little difficult is that these three accounts mirror each other, meaning that the accounts can overlap. But this gives us 5 specific instances of casting out demons in Matthew as the highest total we get, with a couple of non-specific statements about demons being driven out. I did only count the mentions of the term demon and not of a spirit, as there is debate on if they are the same thing. I also did this because of another anomaly that we have between Luke and Acts. Both are written by the same author. But Luke's account of the early church with the Acts of the Apostles lacks the casting out of demons as part of their ministry. Luke specifically mentions demons in his accounting of Christ's ministry but does not include it as a part of the early church.

All of this set my brain to pondering what these details would mean for us now. So, I continued in this task by looking deeper into if we are charged with casting out demons. This brings us to the readings we have for today. In Matthew, we see Jesus assigning authority over unclean spirits and demons, but he gives it to his chosen twelve. They are to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, cast out demons, and to do all of it without payment. The part that is important for today's discussion is that Jesus assigns this to only the twelve. It isn't put as a command for everyone who follows him but a commissioning for his closest followers. That raises a question for us as to whether or not that is something that we are charged with. If you were hoping for a simple answer, I apologize. This is further

complicated in the place we do find a direct command. In Mark, we have it at the very ending of Mark. But it comes in what is known as the longer ending of Mark. It is called this because it doesn't appear in the oldest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel. It is believed by some to have been added by later scribes who were unhappy with the sudden ending. This is furthered by the way the ending is unique compared to the rest of Mark. It includes signs which have not been a part of the account until here. So, we do get that believers will cast out demons, speak in new tongues, pick up snakes, and if they drink anything deadly it won't hurt them. But we get it in a section that is possibly added by a much later author, making it a murky situation instead of a definitive that we were looking for. So, I went on into Luke to see what we get there. Here we have Jesus sending out the seventy-two. When he sends them out, he gives them many of the same commands as the twelve in Matthew, except that Jesus doesn't specifically mention casting out demons. However, when the seventy-two return they rejoice that even the demons submit to them because of the name of Christ. So, they weren't called to cast out demons, but discovered that demons could not stand up to them because they were followers of Jesus.

Overall, this created a rather complicated picture of casting out demons. Where I wanted to find a simple answer, I ended up with a bit of a mess. So, I'll try to impart some wisdom with you now. In ancient times, they often did not differentiate between a physical illness, a mental illness, a spirit, or a demon. They often thought they were all caused by spiritual influences. This hasn't fully ended today. I can't tell you what a demonic influence really looks like, because I've never seen anything that I can positively identify as demonic. But I have met plenty of people who still think that demonic influences and mental illness go hand in hand. Be it that they think mental illness is caused by a demon or that they think people with mental disorders are more susceptible to demons, both can be harmful view. As someone who lives with bipolar disorder, that can be rather hurtful. Because those same people don't say that someone with lots of money is more susceptible, even though money is the cause of many evils. So, I offer a bit of cautionary advice as part of this answer. I'm always going to be hesitant of people who make it their mission to cast out demons, because when you look hard enough, you'll find it whether or not it's really there.

I honestly don't know if we are specifically called to cast out demons, and I don't know what they would look like. But I do know that we are called to fight evil in the many forms that it takes. So, we are called to resist the physical and spiritual forces of evil in this world. And we should begin any resistance to evil with prayer and reflection. Because we should always center ourselves in prayer and do our best to know what is happening before we jump to conclusions. I wish I could give you a clearer answer, but the Bible isn't nearly as clear as some people would like in places. I have never seen a demonic possession myself and have yet to find any definitive account in modern times. But I have met people who have struggled with the stigma that people have applied to conditions that others blame on demons. Would I discount the idea completely then? No. But I would recommend caution, so that we don't end up doing harm to others under the guise of fighting evil. Because when we are in prayer, Christ is with

us and will give us the guidance we need for any situation. Christ will strengthen in resisting evil, both seen and unseen. And God will grant us the wisdom to discern the path forward. In that, we may resist evil in love. Remember that we are called to treat each other with compassion and grace. That we are called to love God and love one another. And in that love, we can oppose evil of all kinds. Because Christ will always be with us and always be able to guide us to find the answers we need when we need them. And I pray that this answer, even as incomplete as it is, helps in gaining understanding. Even if that understanding is in how little sometimes we know about things that seem all too easy for us to reference. And I pray that if you have more questions that you will bring them to me, and I will again do my best with prayer and patience to find those answers that we may grow in Christ together. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Pondering Questions

Our series will have Pastor Cameron answering your questions! Get them to him however is most convenient for you and he will be using those as the basis for our weekly message!

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Nancy Hoke
Family of Don Wells	Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead
Dwight Parsons	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gabel	Sage Martin
Dalton McFarland	Ruth Ann Finley	Jodie Bunch	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Susie Callahan	Kenny Holmes
Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Jackie Potter	Family of Don Holsapple
Family of Loise Roberts	Jeremy Klinger	Phil Hawickhorst	
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Wayne Carrell	Gary & Mary Winterrowd
Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson	Nick & Leana Ochoa
Family of Bunny Sparks	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter
Paul Schulte			

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