

There was a meme that came across my Facebook feed that I found engaging. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the term, a meme is “an element of culture that may be passed from one individual to another by nongenetic means, especially imitation.” If that definition is not helpful, a meme most often looks like an image, a picture, usually a photograph (although it could be a short video clip) with words printed on it that expresses an idea, quote, opinion, or asks a question that can be easily shared with others. Memes can be funny, snarky, inspiring, thought provoking, or disagreeable. They are usually shared through social media sites like Facebook, Instagram or Pinterest, but I’ve seen a few shared through good old-fashioned email too.

The meme that caught my attention was a photograph of the earth from space, probably taken from the space shuttle or international space station. The words printed on the meme formed the question: “If you could remove one thing from the earth, what would it be?” I interpreted that question to be a sort of negative way of asking how I would make the world a better place. There are multiple ways I could answer that question. That particular day I would have answered it by saying I would remove cancer from the earth, because I’ve lost too many good friends too soon to that terrible disease.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with social media, on Facebook there is a way the user can participate by writing comments on posts like the meme I saw. You just have to click on the comment section. When you do that, you can also see comments other people have left. Sometimes, in the best times, it can be a way to engage people in dialogue. Most of the time, however, it is just a place for people to express opinions without much accountability.

I was tempted to leave a comment about removing cancer from the world, so I clicked on the comment section and my screen filled with all the things other people said they would remove. One person said they’d remove war. There were a few others who said cancer. However, most of the comments were just nasty, disrespectful comments saying what they would remove are people who had the opposite political affiliation they did, only they didn’t word it that way. Instead, they used slurs and names that were not only disrespectful, they were, at least in

my opinion, dehumanizing and demonizing. So, given the opportunity to imagine what it would take to make the world a better place, a whole bunch of people used that opportunity express their opinion that a group of people whom they may or may not know but believe are so different from because they disagree politically, are not human.

This line of comments made me feel my answer would not fit or be welcome, so I didn't participate. Now, while I don't know how you would have answered the question the meme asked, or how you would have felt after reading all those comments, but after reading the section of Mark's Gospel we just heard, I believe I do know how the author of Mark's Gospel would have answered that question. In fact, many scholars could argue that Mark's Gospel is a long way of answering that question by saying the one thing has already been removed from the earth in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The answer, according to the author of Mark's Gospel is the power of evil.

It seems to me that for quite some time the Church has felt uncomfortable talking about evil. And perhaps there is good reason for our collective embarrassment, as there was a time when well-intentioned if uninformed interpreters confused the possession of a man with an unclean spirit, as we saw in today's Gospel reading, with someone who has mental illness or some other illness the people in Jesus' day could see but just didn't understand. This sent a confusing message wrongly associating mental illness with evil and has led to unnecessary shame or stigma from those suffering from mental illness and their family members who care for them. It seems even today there are plenty of people who fail to understand mental illness is a disease like diabetes and cancer. Any illness a human being has to struggle with is not the person. Too often the Church has failed people in the midst of that struggle, and there are no words I can say that will ever ease the pain and sense of rejection and abandonment and shame that failure has caused. And for that, all I can do is apologize, repent on behalf of the institution I represent, and ask for forgiveness. And I do apologize. Sometimes the Church gets it wrong. Sometimes the Church causes pain. And I regret those times, and for them, I am sorry, and I ask forgiveness.

I believe part of the Church's failure has been the inability to understand evil, and its own fear of appearing superstitious or ignorant in a world that values education, knowledge, and sophistication. Perhaps too often, evil was used as excuse to explain something that wasn't understood, or something someone didn't want to understand, instead of facing the truth, especially if that truth was we just don't know.

However, Mark's Gospel did mention evil, and does include exorcisms of unclean, a word that means not holy, spirits not once, but several times. Since Mark's Gospel addresses evil or the unholy, then we need to realize for Mark's community, evil was any force or power that was against God and against God's will for God's people. Jesus came so that we might have life in abundance (which does not mean wealth, fame, or celebrity, but life with love, opportunity, compassion, forgiveness, and mercy; a life focused on living the love of God), evil would therefore be any force that interferes with living an abundant or Godly life. Evil is not a person, and demonizing a person for any reason, even if they disagree with us politically, is not living the love of God.

Instead of trying to diagnose the man from today's Gospel, if we instead look at him in that light, we might wonder if the man had something in him that was prohibiting him from hearing God's word, or living healthy, life-giving relationships. It was keeping him from experiencing the deep joys of life. This isn't the same thing as being spared from the hard stuff, like stress, financial insecurity, or loss. Jesus didn't show us loving God would save us from hardships. But what he did show us is God is with us, and no hardship can separate us from God's love, as Paul has written.

And it was that unholy spirit that recognized Jesus and challenged Jesus. Pay attention to that, because we'll see this phenomenon again in Mark's Gospel, where it is the demons or unholy spirits who know who Jesus is, even when ordinary or religious human beings do not. And they never keep quiet about it; they always make a loud challenge in public. And Jesus will always respond the same way to these unholy spirits. Without fear, without seeming to even break a sweat, Jesus will always tell the unholy to be quiet and he will banish them, tell them to get out and away from the person they were tormenting. In today's section of Mark's Gospel, we see the unholy spirit didn't even try to fight Jesus, it obeyed him. Scholars tell us this shows Jesus has already conquered the powers of evil; they have no power over him and being conquered, they must do as he commands.

This is especially significant in Mark's Gospel because the author of Mark chose to make Jesus' first action after calling his disciples not a sermon, not a teaching, not a miracle transforming water into wine, but casting out an unholy spirit from a person, setting that person free from the oppressive power that was keeping him from God, even when that person was in a synagogue. The author of Mark wanted to make clear from the get go who Jesus is, and what he has done. He has defeated the powers of evil. This is the authority Jesus has, authority of the love of God, the authority over evil. Jesus doesn't have the sort of authority we are used to: he doesn't have a master's degree or doctorate in divinity, he doesn't have a certified document stating he is God's Son, he doesn't have a position at a prestigious institution or business, he didn't have a big weapon, and he doesn't even have a business card. He didn't have the sort of authority the people of his time were used to either, which is probably why word about him spread as quickly as a meme on Facebook.

For those of us who follow Jesus today, even if we are embarrassed to talk about evil, there is the important image Jesus showed when he cast out the unholy from the man, that Jesus did not dehumanize or demonize the man who was suffering from the unholy spirit. Nor did he shame or blame the man in any way for what was inside him. He was able to differentiate between the two. This is so important, especially whenever we might be tempted to engage in what I observed on the comment section of the meme where people were quick to dehumanize other human beings simply for having different political agendas. When we see such activity, we need to name it for what it is: unhealthy and not what Jesus did.

This part of Mark's Gospel can also be helpful by showing us evil isn't necessarily that which we don't like or disagree with, or don't understand, but that which attempts to prohibit God's dream for all people, and might make us pause and think before we use the word, which might help us have better conversations about things we disagree about.

This section of Mark's Gospel can also help us with something harder. While scholars tell us the author of Mark is stating Jesus has defeated the powers of evil, if we understand evil as being the power that attempts to prohibit God's dream for all people, it is pretty easy to see that power has not really left the planet. It is still present, and not just in demonizing people on social media; it is painfully present in things like racism, sexism, greed, in anything that puts people down, or fails to respect the dignity of every human being. This does not mean

the author of Mark is wrong. But what Mark's Gospel does show us is evil does not have to have power over us. We do not have to believe its lies or its manipulations, no matter how good they might make us feel by making someone else the bad guy. We don't have to live by its small-minded model of scarcity. We can live another way. We are not Jesus, but we who follow him can call on him for help, we can, as it says in the renewal of our baptismal vows, persevere in resisting evil by repenting when we sin, asking for forgiveness and forgiving, by loving our neighbor as ourselves, by striving for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of every person. We can do this wherever we are: at work or school, in church, in a store, at home, walking down the street, and even when we are on social media. I don't know what doing this will look like for you, but I bet you do, especially when you pray and think about it.

Perhaps that is the best kind of meme we can share.