

4 Epiphany. January 31, 2021.  
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**What's In A Name**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

In 1977 the television series *Roots* premiered. At the time I was only 4 years old, but I can still remember the energy, the cultural "buzz" around the series based on the novel by Alex Haley that traced the saga of Kunta Kinte's family from capture in Africa, through slavery, to freedom. I can remember people were talking about this series. I remember my mother had read the book. And I remember every night it was on; my parents and I sat in front of the television and watched the episodes together.

For those of you who have also watched this series starring LaVar Burton, the recently deceased Cicely Tyson, Maya Angelou, Ben Vereen, John Amos with many other famous actors, you might think the series was too mature or intense at times for a young viewer. Something you might not be able to tell by looking at me is that not all of my extended family members are white and my parents wanted to expose me to as much diversity as they could. They were also vigilant about helping me through traumatic scenes by explaining them to me in ways my four-year-old self could understand.

One of the scenes I remember to this day is the tragic whipping scene, when Kunta Kinte was brutally whipped in front of all the other people on the plantation because he refused to accept the name the white slave owner gave him. It was a brutal scene with the white overseer yelling the name the owner wanted, and Kunta boldly saying as he was whipped, "My name is Kunta Kinte." Eventually, his spirit was broken, and he accepted the name of slavery.

My parents could tell I was upset by this scene and my mother helped me understand it by saying to me, "Do you know why it hurts so much to see what happened to Kunta? Because he was degraded, he was not respected for who and what he really is. What happened to him was dehumanizing, it was treating him as less than a human being. It hurts to see that happen. It's okay to feel bad. Did you see the white man who whipped Kunta? He dehumanized another human being, and that made him a monster. That is why slavery is not only wrong, but also evil, because it makes everyone who believes in it and practices it less than they can be, less than human. Slavery is dehumanizing to everyone."

That lesson helped me understand the other atrocities in the series for what they are and has stayed with me to this day. My mother's lesson given during a commercial break in 1977 has helped me understand the importance of recognizing and naming evil as the opposite of the healing liberation Jesus exemplified in today's Gospel reading as part of how I practice the Way of Love and follow Jesus.

Today's Gospel reading from Mark's Gospel might make some folks uncomfortable because it is one of the stories of Jesus exorcising what the author of Mark's Gospel called an unclean spirit. Unfortunately, often well-meaning interpreters, commentators, or even scholars sometimes interpret this and other exorcisms Jesus performed by putting down the people of Jesus' day; insisting they were superstitious and didn't understand things like mental illness and therefore any story involving unclean spirits or demons were how those poor, unformed, and unenlightened people of Jesus' day explained mental illness. Some commentators have gone so far as to try and diagnose the illness. As well intentioned as such interpretations might be, it's unfortunate those interpretations fail to see the damage they can do to people who really are suffering from mental illness and have nothing in common whatsoever with these accounts in the Gospels. Unfortunately, such misinterpretations can cause feelings of shame and further stigma for people dealing with their illnesses and for their families. Such interpretations are the opposite of what the Gospel writers intended: to reveal the holy, healing, liberating love of God personified in Jesus.

Perhaps a reason for the misinterpretation is the discomfort with identifying unclean or evil spirits and associating such behavior as embarrassingly uneducated. There is the idea that evil does not exist, and anything called evil can be explained as something else. The trouble with this idea is it can be used to justify belittling or dehumanizing our fellow human beings simply for being different.

People who struggle with mental illness are not the same as what Jesus encountered in today's Gospel, there is no comparison. The man with the unclean spirit was someone who brought his unclean spirit, whether it was his hatred, an unhealed spiritual or emotional wound that had festered into revenge or something worse, whatever evil belief had enslaved him into making him less than he could be, he brought that with him to the synagogue that day.

It's fascinating to me that this unclean spirit recognized Jesus for who he is before anyone else, even Jesus' disciples, and the unclean spirit called out Jesus' name. Scholars like Ched Meyers claims this is a serious and important detail. The unclean

spirit was trying to enslave or exert its power over Jesus by calling him by his name. Naming was as important a practice in ancient times as it is today. Naming is about power, having power over someone, or claiming power which is why slave owners wouldn't let people keep their own names, it was proof of ownership. And it is why once free, former slaves chose new names for themselves. On the other hand, naming a problem or situation is the first step to improving it, instead of letting the situation have power over you.

That could explain why Jesus told the unclean spirit to be silent. He didn't give it power or authority over him and instead cast it away, healing the person who had been afflicted and freeing him from whatever had been getting in the way of being close to God and his neighbors.

Although we might not feel comfortable admitting it, and we live in different times, there are still unclean spirits among us. If we learn how to identify them, like my mother taught me, we might be able to prevent them from having power over us. These are ideals, beliefs, mythologies that are contrary to the belief all people are made in God's image and therefore loved by God, who desires for us lives free from oppression that prohibits us from feeling God's love and loving God and others.

Today we call the unclean spirits slavery, racism, sexism, misogyny, white supremacy, Christian nationalism, ageism, anything that promotes any sort of tribalism - the belief one group is superior to others and therefore is deserving of special treatment and privilege - over the common good, any belief rooted in dehumanizing anyone who is different, or justifies seeing people as less than people. As history and current events reveal, all of these unclean spirits have attempted to co-opt Jesus and name him as the authority of their belief. But today's Gospel reveals Jesus has nothing to do with such things, they are not any authority he endorses nor claims. Instead, as is clearly articulated in today's Gospel, Jesus has power over all unclean spirits. That means for those of us who follow Jesus, no matter how tempting or terrifying such unclean spirits are, we can and are free to reject them. They have no power or authority over us. Our power, our authority comes from Jesus. It frees us from tribalism, from the belittling behavior of labeling individuals as winners or losers and frees us to truly love our neighbors - our LGBTQ+ neighbors, our Black neighbors, our republican neighbors, our democrat neighbors, our independent neighbors, our unemployed neighbors, our brown and Latino neighbors, our Jewish neighbors, our Muslim neighbors, anyone who looks or thinks differently, or has a different religion. As the old hymn says, all the children in the world are precious in Jesus' sight.

Believing in Jesus' authority means we are free to reject all those unclean spirits, but it does not mean Jesus frees us to do whatever we want. Jesus didn't die and rise again so we could be selfish, but so we could be free to live the way of love of God. This isn't a program, it's a way of life. One where we do what we can to show respect and treat all people with dignity. Sometimes that means going beyond charity to work toward societal change to eradicate poverty. Right now, it means following the guidelines and mandates intended to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus until at least seventy percent of the world's population has been successfully vaccinated. Other times following the Way of Love is listening to the person who disagrees with us in a way that makes them feel heard- not agreeing with them - but letting them know you hear what they are saying. In a podcast I listen to, I recently heard about a Muslim woman who was verbally abused on social media by several members of a white supremacy group. The woman's surprisingly loving response to the abuse was to answer their hurtful comments in ways that showed she heard them, understood where they were coming from, she acknowledged and helped them name the personal pain behind their anger. This was so unexpected it ended up being transformative for the members of the white supremacy group. It made them reflect on the experience of being heard by someone different from them and the unclean spirit of white supremacy they had given themselves to, and the deep sorrow that had led them to that faulty belief system. The experience caused them to leave the white supremacy group because it was dehumanizing to a person - a fellow human being they now saw as a friend.

That is the healing power of the Love of God Jesus frees us all to embody. That is loving our neighbors and letting that liberating love heal people and free them from the unclean spirits that kept them trapped in fear and anger they can be afraid to name. Even though it isn't always so easy to do or live into, it is empowering and hopeful just knowing it is true, it is real, it has already happened, and it can and will happen again.