

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia  
29 January 2012**

*Epiphany 4: Deut 18:15-20; Ps 111;  
1 Cor 8:1-13; Mk 1:21-28*

*Thomas Eoyang*

As you all know, before I went to seminary I worked for one of the biggest and best known publishers that specialized in medicine, nursing, and health-related professions, where I worked only on books intended for nurses. Our medical textbooks were much better known and much more profitable than our nursing books, so it was no surprise that our group decisions on what kinds of books to accept for publication were heavily influenced by a medical, hard-science mind-set.

Still, we on the nursing side could sometimes make the others understand that our audience, our market, had a different perspective on the patient than the doctors did. Carefully, persistently, though not always successfully, we nursing editors tried to explain to our medical colleagues what we learned from our authors and our readers: that nurses understood human health and human illness in some ways—not in all ways, but in some ways—differently than physicians did.

Two examples of projects that one of my colleagues was able to get the company to accept were a psychiatric nursing textbook that had spirituality as one of its major themes, and another book devoted entirely to spirituality and nursing. Similar books could never have been proposed by a medical editor as being of interest to doctors. It would have been a career-ender. Only at the margins of the medical literature are some respected physicians like Oliver Sacks and Abraham Verghese talking about the spiritual dimension of the illness experience.

Now as someone who has observed the medical and nursing professions from the outside, I think it makes total sense to recognize that a disruption of human health is a spiritual as well as a physiological and emotional event. Does that mean I therefore believe that a physical or even mental illness can be cured solely by spiritual intervention such as prayer or meditation? Speaking just for myself, no it does not mean that.

Both my parents and one of my siblings have had colon cancer. I've read enough literature about this condition to be convinced that I need to get a colonoscopy every three to five years, and I am deeply grateful for this knowledge, and am deeply grateful for the medical research that revealed it.

But there is no question in my mind that there is always a spiritual dimension to my experience of human health and illness that no colonoscopy can erase. If I were to get colon cancer despite my best efforts at prevention, there would be a spiritual side to my experience that even successful colon surgery would not begin to address. I think it may be in this light that the many stories of Jesus healing people in the gospels can be heard and understood, given that there was nothing like our modern medical understanding, our modern medical systems in place when people in Jesus' time got sick.

We have no idea about the symptoms of the particular man in today's gospel reading in Mark. The text simply says that he was a man with an unclean spirit. In another healing of a man possessed by demons, reported in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, the one where Jesus sends the unclean spirits into a herd of pigs who then rush into the sea and drown, the man is described as living among the tombs, howling and hurting

himself with rocks. We gather that those who heard these gospel stories of people possessed by unclean spirits were witnesses to their odd or antisocial behavior. I think we modern people immediately assume that this condition was somehow the first-century understanding of what we consider mental illness. We can look at how the possessed men in the gospel stories are positioned, and take note that one feature of both mental and physical illness can be to separate the ill person from the rest of society.

In today's gospel passage, Mark reports that Jesus has a conversation not with the man but with the unclean spirit living inside him. The unclean spirit speaks and shows that he recognizes that Jesus is a threat, and that Jesus is the Holy One of God. Jesus commands the spirit to come out of the man, and as the man's body shakes violently the unclean spirit comes out of him. And all the people around them, who were amazed at the beginning of the scene at the teaching that Jesus did, are now even more amazed that the new teaching is accompanied by the power to chase away unclean spirits.

And here we go back over the whole passage and notice a few things. In the beginning when the people are astounded at Jesus' teaching, and characterize it as "having authority, not as the scribes," we notice that we've never been told what the amazing teaching was. What exactly did Jesus say to them that provoked such a strong response? It is just at that moment that the man with the unclean spirit comes into the picture, and we get a healing story, and never do hear what the teaching was about.

Then, if we've been reading the passage not just in isolation, but continuously with the preceding sections as Mark must have intended, we notice that just ten verses before this scene is the scene by the river Jordan where Jesus gets baptized by John. And we remember that the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit descended like a dove on him. So Jesus is possessed by a Spirit every bit as much as the man he heals. But the Spirit that possesses Jesus is the Spirit of God, while the spirit that possesses the unnamed man is one that everyone around him recognizes as an unclean spirit.

Slowly, as we put together the puzzle pieces of this story, we can come to understand that the teaching we never hear, and the healing that we witness might in fact be two parts of the same action. The people standing around the synagogue are equally amazed by both events—the teaching and the healing. And we might begin to wonder whether what Jesus has to teach us also has the power to heal us.

We might begin to wonder whether teaching us about compassion can heal us from the separation from the people around us, especially those people whose pain is itself so excruciating that we think we can't bear to be near it. That pain may come from illness; it may come from poverty; it may come from hopelessness; it may come from falling victim to a culture of drugs and violence; it may come from the oppressive behavior of others. But compassion is the spiritual strength that allows us to feel that pain, to share in it, to relieve it as best we can, and to look for its root to get rid of it.

We might begin to wonder whether teaching us about reconciliation can heal us from the hurt and fear, the mistrust and hatred, that drive us to acts of violence and oppression. When we automatically label others as being possessed by evil demons—even when they fly planes into our buildings, or shoot up our children's classrooms—we shut the door on any attempt at healing our collective human brokenness; we close our eyes to any possibility of discovering what all human beings might value in common. But keeping our spirits trained on the desire for reconciliation can allow us to think out of the box, to uncover what God has been trying to teach us through the ages: that love is

more powerful than hate, that mercy and forgiveness are healing agents, and that striving for wholeness is the best prevention strategy for the suffering of brokenness.

And we might begin to wonder whether teaching us about justice can heal us from being possessed by the demons of materialism and greed, the spiritual diseases of pride, selfishness, and cruelty. We begin to see that an unjust world where you must have much much less so that I can have much much more is an unsustainable world, a world where peace is an impossible dream, a world where our failure to recognize each other's dignity and equal right to life's essential needs leads only to more hopelessness, more violence, more hatred, and more destruction.

We might all begin to wonder whether Jesus' teaching and Jesus' healing are both pointed towards the same ends: that we as individuals might be truly freed from the demons that torment each of us, and that that freedom can only come when we strive to free all humanity from the demons that torment all of us together. We might consider that in God's infinite love God wants nothing more passionately than for us all to be reconciled, whole, healed, and at peace.