

“The Parables According to Mark, Part 9: The Strong Man”  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for August 9<sup>th</sup> 2015 (11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)  
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Mark 3: 20-27

And so our journey...our journey through Mark’s collection of parables and parabolic sayings: that journey, today, comes to a close. And it comes to a close not far from where we began way back in mid-June! As some of you will recall, we began our exploration a couple of chapters ahead of Mark’s great parable chapter—chapter four—in which are found not only the core collection of Mark’s parables, but also a rather odd account as to why Jesus bothers to teach with parables in the first place. Later on, of course, we discovered that there are parables to be found in portions of Mark beyond its fourth chapter, but for this morning I’m taking us back to one of the briefest, and in many ways one of the most peculiar, and for my money one of the most defining little sayings Jesus offers in Mark’s Gospel.

Here context is pretty much everything...because apart from its context, this little saying...

*“...no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered...”*

...apart from its context, we can surely agree that this strange little one-and-a-half liner would make no sense whatsoever!

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The third chapter...the third chapter of Mark contains a rich assortment of material. Some of that material involves Christ’s ongoing vocational work, by which I mean the work of calling those whose vocation it will be, to form his core disciples. In this same chapter is also to be found episodes that reveal the extent to which Jesus’ reputation is growing, along with the size of the crowds following him. Sadly, this chapter also includes episodes in which we learn more about some of the pushback being directed at Jesus: by his family (who fear that he has, to put it bluntly, gone off his rocker) and by the religious authorities who seem convinced that he is up to no good.

And the saying I want us to consider comes from one of the most pointed confrontations Jesus has with those authorities. By now they have become familiar with the fact that Jesus heals. By now, they have also become familiar, with the way in which at least some of his healings involve the exorcism of evil spirits. The confrontation we need to look at this morning revolves around

precisely that facet of Christ's ministry: his confrontation with and triumph over unclean spirits, spirits that are doing great harm to their human victims.

But here...before we go any further...we need to take a time out to consider this whole business of evil spirits, this whole realm of personified evil. Why?

Because twenty-five years in United Church ministry—if it has taught me nothing else—has most certainly taught me that the easiest way to make a group of United Church folk highly uncomfortable is by talking to them about evil spirits. Works every time...and I have no reason to believe that today will be an exception. My impression...my impression...is that talk of such spirits raises a number of understandable concerns. There's the scientific concern: namely the contention that ours is a world which, through the manifold blessings of science, has outgrown a world-view that needs to explain every problematic event as the result of the devil. There's the moral/ethical concern: namely the contention that talk of the devil is, all too often, a way of ducking personal responsibility for our bad choices, sort of like Flip Wilson's Geraldine who liked nothing better than to be able to say, "the devil made me do it!" Finally, there is a pretty important spiritual concern: namely the contention that focusing on the realm of evil spirits will cause us to look in the wrong direction, landing us in a world even more fearful than the world we already live in. Isn't our world terrifying enough? How does it help anyone to live rightly and well by immersing them in a world-view that is one part "The Exorcist", and one part "The Nightmare on Elm Street". How does any of that help us to be a better, bolder, more loving people?

Suffice it to say that I am far from a stranger to these concerns, although it is the final, spiritual objection that most concerns me. If, even for an instant, I thought that my main job description—or even a significant aspect of my job description—was to scare you people into believing in the devil, I hope I would have the integrity to shut-up and sit down. Life is terrifying and challenging enough, without Christian preachers demanding that our congregants "believe" in the devil: God forbid! Neither am I convinced that my job here this morning, or on any other morning, is to convince you to subscribe to a particular world-view: one built upon the insistence that "real" Christians believe in the existence of the sort of "personified evil" that goes by such names as "the devil", "Satan" "Lucifer", or "Beelzebub". That, most certainly, is not my calling! Nevertheless!

Surely...surely what we can agree upon is that our world is far from the world God pronounced "good" at the beginning of time. Surely...surely what we can agree upon is that the countless traces of beauty, goodness and truth we see all around us, are continually threatened and undermined by an undertow of natural and human destructiveness for which we human beings appear to have no definitive answers. Unless we have buried our heads deeply in the sand...completely ignoring today's headlines let alone the bruised and battered world we personally encounter at every turn...we will not be strangers to the

brokenness that is all around us, and the profound questions that hang over the head of each and every human life. Whether we attribute this to the demonic...or to nothing fancier than the law of entropy...surely we can agree that our world is a fallen one, a world that somehow fails to live up to our expectations for it, a world—quite simply—that awaits its redemption. And surely that explains... explains why the Christ...the Messiah...God's beloved...came to us not only as a preacher...not only as a teacher...but as a healer, a cleanser, an exorcist—if you will—one prepared to do battle with any power seeking to oppose God, seeking to defile God's good creation.

And so...in the early chapters of Mark, we see Jesus working to heal, to cleanse and to restore the image of God in a number of encounters with broken human beings and yet—alas!—in the early chapters of Mark...specifically in Mark's third chapter...we also hear the voice of those who are convinced Christ is doing good through the power of evil...is confronting evil as an especially deceptive agent of evil.

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In answering his accusers, Jesus offers a two-edged response. On the one hand, he tells them that their accusation doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

*“How can Satan cast out Satan? If a Kingdom is divided against itself, that Kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan is risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.”*

It's pretty hard to escape the logic of those words. In effect, he's saying that his critics have a choice. On the one hand, they can choose to regard his exorcisms as the work of a good man, a man sent by God: work for which they ought to be thankful. On the other hand, if they insist on being perverse, they can choose to regard his work as that of some sort of stealth agent of evil, meaning that the “evil one” has become so mixed up and divided, that it's just a matter of time before it all comes crashing down. In that event, they ought still to be thankful. Game! Set! Match. However!! Despite the air-tight logic of the case he has made, Jesus doesn't stop there.

He has one further thing to tell them...and yes, it takes the form of that strange little parabolic saying. *“...no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered...”* Huh? What's he driving at here? What point is he trying to make??

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Well. As with any parable...there is clearly more than one way of approach. Nevertheless: no matter how often I circle this particular block...no matter how often I try to get a glimpse of this whole episode...I continually come back to one explanation...namely...

Namely that Satan is the strong man...that Jesus is the one who comes like a thief in the night to rob him...and that the extent to which Jesus (through his healings, his cleansings, his restorations of human dignity)...to the extent Jesus is succeeding in his mission, to that extent it serves as proof that he has, in fact, succeeded in tying up the strong man: that he has, in fact, broken evil's back...that he has, in fact, entered into a confrontation with evil that is destined to end in victory, that is destined to end triumphantly.

And, you know, just as we have a tendency to struggle with the whole realm of the demonic...in a multi-cultural, multi-faith world we also have a tendency to struggle with what is sometimes called "Christian triumphalism". And yes! At its worst, Christian triumphalism presents us with something ugly: namely the belief that we and our team are on the winning side. Led by King Jesus, we are marching to victory...and all you other guys had better duck for cover...because we're nearing the goal line, and once we score that touchdown all hell is gonna break loose for anyone not cheering us on. Bully for us!

Frankly...frankly...if I were to think, for an instant, that such an account is an accurate depiction of the Gospel, I would want no part of it! None whatsoever! And yet!

To speak of a promised triumph...to speak of a day when God will be all in all...is to speak of something God is up to...not something for which you or I or any other human agent is entitled to take credit. Rightly understood, the story of Jesus Christ, is the story of the God who—having entered our world bearing our flesh—struck the decisive note in the triumphant symphony (yes, the **triumphant** closing movement of the symphony) God is composing in each of our lives. If we, as the Church, cannot offer that hope to the world—even if the world chooses to dismiss it as nothing more than a toxic mix of wishful thinking and triumphalism—then frankly I don't believe we have anything whatsoever to offer the world: and we should close shop immediately. As a matter of fact...

As a matter of fact...what makes the parable of the strong man so foundational, is that it provides a pretty good lens through which to view the great parable...the unsurpassed parable...the flesh and blood parable that was the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Taking our flesh! Living our life! Healing...cleansing...restoring...and then...at the end...offering himself in such total solidarity with his sisters and brothers...that even his death, his death upon a Cross, became a gateway through which God has set and continues to set the captives free. While it is most certainly true that we remain part and parcel of a world deeply scarred...while it is true that evidence of continued human bondage

is at times overwhelming...we, as his followers, are invited to live with the assurance that, God-in-Christ, has broken evil's back, has bound the strong man for ever and a day! The demonic voice of the accuser has been silenced. God's yes to human beings of every race and tribe has been proclaimed. And we, who have heard the first rumours of those happy tidings have been given the joyful task of proclaiming the Good News: in word and in deed...in song...and yes, in the living parables of the lives we lead day by day.

And Jesus said to them: *"...no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered..."*

Friends! Hear good news! Jesus the plunderer, Jesus the thief in the night has drawn near! In Christ God's Kingdom has indeed drawn near: and neither death, the devil, nor the gates of hell will prevail against it! Believe that! And then, go out to live it with a bold and daring love! This day...and always! Amen!!