

HEARING GOD'S WORD

Prayer for Illumination

Holy Spirit, your people call out for understanding. Bring to our yearning hearts and minds the truth of your Word; in Jesus' name. Amen

Scripture Lessons

Old Testament

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 (NIV)

¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.

¹⁶ For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die."

¹⁷ The LORD said to me: "What they say is good.¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹ I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name. ²⁰ But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death."

Epistle 1 Corinthians 8: 1—13 (MSG)

8 ¹⁻³ The question keeps coming up regarding meat that has been offered up to an idol: Should you attend meals where such meat is served or not? We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions—but sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all

⁴⁻⁶ Some people say, quite rightly, that idols have no actual existence, that there's nothing to them, that there is no God other than our one God, that no matter how many of these so-called gods are named and worshiped they still don't add up to anything but a tall story. They say—again, quite rightly—that there is only one God the Father, that everything comes from him, and that he wants us to live for him. ALSO, they say that there is only one Master—Jesus the Messiah—and that everything is for his sake, including us. Yes. It's true,

⁷ In strict logic, then, nothing happened to the meat when it was offered up to an idol. It's just like any other meat I know that, and you know that but knowing isn't everything. If it becomes

everything, some people end up as know-it-alls who treat others as know-nothings. Real knowledge isn't that insensitive.

⁸We need to be sensitive to the fact that we're not all at the same level of understanding in this- Some of you have spent your entire lives eating "idol meat," and are sure that there's something bad in the meat that then becomes something bad inside of you. An imagination and conscience shaped under those conditions isn't going to change overnight.

⁹ But fortunately God doesn't grade us on our diet We're neither commended when we clean our plate nor reprimanded when we just can't stomach it. But God does care when you use your freedom carelessly in a way that leads a fellow believer still vulnerable to those old associations to be thrown off track.

¹⁰ For instance, say you flaunt your freedom by going to a banquet thrown in honor of idols, where the main course is meat sacrificed to idols. Isn't there great danger if someone still struggling over this issue, someone who looks up to you as knowledgeable and mature, sees you go into that banquet? The danger is that he will

become terribly confused—maybe even to the point of getting mixed up himself in what his conscience tells him is wrong.

11-13 Christ gave up his life for that person. Wouldn't you at least be willing to give up going to dinner for him—because, as you say, it doesn't really make any difference? But it does make a difference if you hurt your friend terribly, risking his eternal ruin! When you hurt your friend, you hurt Christ. A free meal here and there isn't worth it at the cost of even one of these weak ones." So, never go to these idol-tainted meals if there's any chance it will trip up one of your brothers or sisters.

Gospel

Mark 1:21-28 (NIV)

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

Naming the Spirits

Based on a sermon by same title by Dr. Philip W. McLarty, Pastor of 1st PC, Hope, AK

According to Mark, ^{Jesus} ~~he~~ got off to a quick start. The first Sabbath ^{Jesus} ~~he~~ was there he went to the synagogue and taught. Mark says the elders were astounded at his teaching because he taught as one with authority and not as their scribes. (Mark 1:21-22)

So far, so good. Then trouble began. Mark says,

"Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.'" (Mark 1:23-24)

Now, who was this man with unclean spirit? Mark doesn't say. The fact that he's there in the synagogue suggests he was one of the Regulars. He may have even been one of the elders. We can assume he looked and like everyone else - reverent, righteous, and respectable.

So, what unclean spirit did he have? Again, we don't know, and this is where we're apt to get off-track. To speak of an unclean spirit is to suggest being possessed by a demon, and that conjures up images of Poltergeist - people with wild eyes and bad hair and green stuff spewing out of their mouths - deranged people who belong in cages or late-night horror movies.

What I'd like for us to think about this morning is that this man whom Jesus confronted might not have been all that different from us, and the unclean spirit he had might have been something we can all identify with. If so, I'm hoping that by naming some of the spirits that commonly afflict us, we'll be drawn that much closer to the Spirit of the living God in Jesus Christ.

Listen again to what the man said:

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

I'd say this man had an overly protective spirit. He sounds like someone who can see the handwriting on the wall - that it wouldn't be long before this Jesus, "who taught with authority, and not as their scribes," (Mark 1 :22) would soon shake the foundations of the faith and upset their comfortable little ways of doing things.

If I were guessing, I'd say he was one of the scribes - someone who had the most to lose and, therefore, the most to protect.

DR. PHILIP W. McLARTY, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Hope, Arkansas tells of an elder in his church years ago with an overly protective spirit. He considered himself one of the last remaining guardians of the one, true faith. His father had been a longtime Presbyterian minister. For him, the 'true faith' was what he remembered his father doing and saying. So, he took it upon himself to stand guard watching for any signs of heresy, then exposing them first to the heretic - which, in this case, was Dr. McLarty- then to everyone else who would listen.

Dr. McLarty continues with a story to show his point. One time he introduced the Service of Renewal of Baptismal Vows. The Session had given its approval, and the service went well. More than half the congregation came forward when the invitation was given. But when he walked to the back of the sanctuary at the close of the service, there was the same Elder waiting for the pastor. "You've crossed the line this time," he said with fire in his eyes. "That was clearly un-Presbyterian!"

The explanation that the service came right out of our Book of Common Worship just seemed to irritate the Elder more. If he could've had his way, Dr. McLarty would've been looking for another call that afternoon.

The pastor hastened to say that the man was not a bad person. On the contrary, he was a respected member of the community, a lifelong member of the church, a man of faith and integrity - someone you'd be honored to know. When the pastor did move to another city some five years later, the two parted as friends. They had grown to love one another as brothers in Christ, though they obviously didn't see eye-to-eye on many things.

The Elder had an unclean spirit. He was overly protective of the faith. And, in his zealousness to safeguard the church from heretics like Dr. McLarty, he stood in the way of the gospel that offers new life and, with it, new expressions of praise and worship.

One more story this pastor shared was one of an elder who was possessed by a spirit of pettiness. Again, man was upstanding in the church and community and you'd never find a more dedicated and committed layman. It's just that he couldn't see the big picture. He kept getting hung up on minutia.

The choir director and organist asked for a modest raise. Well, she deserved it. When the church hired her to direct the choir, they had a part-time organist. But two weeks later, the organist quit. So, the choir director offered to play the organ and direct the choir. What a deal. Not to mention the fact that she was well-qualified - she had a doctorate in organ performance from a major university, for heaven's sake. It's just that, when she assumed both roles, nobody said anything about adjusting her salary upward. So, at the end of the year, she asked for more - not twice as much, though she could've made a case for that _just a modest increase.

But, instead of sailing through the Personnel Committee, this elder with a spirit of pettiness wanted to review her salary on the basis of how many hours she worked!

Both the choir director and the organist positions were part-time, and he figured since she was doing both, there must be some overlap of the time she spent on each. One of the other committee members argued that you don't pay an artist by the clock. Talent isn't meted out in one-hour increments. Another said we ought to be thankful to have someone of her caliber. And another pointed out how she had prepared a complete organ concert, without any extra compensation, to help us celebrate the church's Centennial.

All this, and the elder still wasn't convinced. He said, "I just don't see how we can justify paying her what we do for no more hours than she spends at the church." Dr. McLarty says, "Thankfully, the others outvoted him five-to-one and gave her a nice raise."

Well, these are only two examples, but you get the point: Unclean spirits are a part of everyday life. You see them all the time, They lurk within us and about us, and, like the spirit of the man in the synagogue that day, they stand in the way of God's grace and love.

So, how do we get rid of them? The first step is to name them and so, expose them for what they are.

Another pastor made it a practice to name all the unclean spirits plaguing his congregation. He'd say things like, "He has a contentious spirit." Or, "She has a spirit of animosity." "He has a controlling spirit." "She has a spirit of jealousy."

His intent wasn't to be judgmental, but to be honest. These are attitudes and behaviors that can kill a church. I've seen it, and you have too. The first step in getting rid of them is to bring them out in the open Unclean spirits are like cockroaches - when you shine a light on them they run for their lives. Jesus put it this way:

"Those who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (John 3:20-21)

Name the unclean spirits. That's the first step. And the second step is to replace them with the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Unclean spirits and the Holy Spirit are incompatible. You can have one or the other, but not both. And this is the Good News: When the Spirit of Jesus Christ fills your mind and heart, the unclean spirit within you has to go; and, when it goes, a visible transformation occurs.

The movie Fireproof was created and produced by a congregation in Albany, Georgia to offer help and support to married couples.

It starts off with a husband and wife at odds with each other and stressed out by the pressures of everyday life. As you get to know them better, you realize how egocentric they both are, The husband is caught up in his wants and wishes; the wife is caught up in hers. The marriage quickly deteriorates and they decide to split up.

It's a long story how this all comes about, but the turning point of the movie is the moment at which the husband finally hits bottom and admits he needs help. In total surrender, he turns to Christ and begins a 40-day program of putting his wife first. Every day he does something intentional to honor her and show his affection.

Sadly, she doesn't respond. She doesn't trust his motives. She thinks he's just trying to soften her resolve so that he'll come out better in the divorce settlement.

Still, he persists. He makes her coffee in the morning, sends her flowers, cleans the house, calls to see how her day is going and he gets nothing in return but a slap in the face. Only now, instead of losing his temper and fighting back as he did before, he leans on the strength of God's Spirit and returns her rejection with deeds of loving kindness. His unclean spirit of self-centeredness had given way to a fresh spirit of unconditional love and heartfelt devotion.

His body language spoke volumes. Whereas before, his face was strained and his blood vessels popped out when he spoke; now, his eyebrows softened and his breathing was relaxed. Anyone could see the change: Here was a man filled with the peace of God and now able to share the gifts of God's love, regardless of what he got in return.

I'd like to invite you to name the unclean spirits you've seen around here. For example, several folks have concerns that a spirit of complacency seems to be so prevalent among . . .

Complacency is a close kin to lethargy and apathy and a spirit of resignation. They all lead to decline, and decline spells a slow and certain death.

Well, if I'm right and we do have a spirit of complacency among us, we need to be honest about it. We need to name it and then ask God to give us a new spirit

of determination and resolve to build up the church's membership and find its true mission. A mission that will inspire people.

Of course, I could be wrong. So, I invite you to name the unclean spirits you see lurking around here. And, while you're at it, name the unclean spirits in your own heart.

Paul said the fruit of God's Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) Does that fit you? Is this the way your best friends would describe you to others?

Listen: The secret to driving out the unclean spirits is to name them and replace them with the Spirit of God, and that leads to transformation. The change may be immediate, as it was in the movie; or it may be gradual, as, little by little, you become more Christ-like.

Either way, when the Spirit of the living God comes into your heart, the unclean spirits will scatter, and you'll feel like a new man or new woman.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Please stand, if able, and join in singing our
Hymn of Response:#