

Naming and Confronting our Demons

sermon digest

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Luke 11:14-26

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In discussing the meaning of the demonic in this scientific age, Walter Wink (*Unmasking the Powers*, 54) addresses a conversation immediately following World War II among German theologians on the biblical question of the demonic. They were trying to comprehend the evil which had befallen their nation. How could an entire nation have yielded up basic human decency to the authority of an obviously insane leader? How could ordinary people become convinced that they were members of a superior human race? How could they justify the claim of world domination and relegating the value of other people as no more than animals? And perhaps the most difficult part of the conversation was the realization that respected theologians under Hitler had not only cooperated with the Third Reich, they had provided theological justification for dehumanizing the global Jewish community.

German theologians were desperate to find some outside explanation for the obvious evil that in some sense had involved the whole German nation. Is this human nature? Are human beings basically evil? How could humans become so insensitive to the pain of others and so obedient to the authority of the State that they would slaughter and torture babies, the elderly, the mentally ill, homosexuals, Jews, and Gypsies without a twinge of conscience? Surely there must be some outside spiritual power that overwhelms the human conscience to make people do the unthinkable! There must be something to the demon possession that we have preferred to ignore in the New Testament. Perhaps we are not evil; we have been possessed! Or, in the idiom of Flip Wilson, "The Devil made me do it!"

Karl Barth interrupted his colleagues, "Why all this talk about demons? Why not just admit we have been political idiots?" Barth had been removed from his teaching post in Berlin for refusing to begin his classes with the required patriotic rituals, including the "Heil Hitler." He moved to Switzerland where he led in the Barman Declaration challenging Hitler's claim of the place of God. A German pastor commented, "You cannot understand what has happened in Germany unless you understand that we were possessed by demonic powers. I do not say this to excuse ourselves, because *we let ourselves be possessed.*"

Wink concluded that both Barth and the German pastor were correct. However the whole conversation was wrong in assuming that the demonic was some outside spirit being that takes over our lives rather than the actual spirituality of Nazism. The demonic was inseparable from its political forms, the Hitler Youth, the S.S., the Gestapo, the cooperation of the churches, and the myth of Aryan racial purity. The ideas, the myths, the values, and the goals of the institutions were spiritual forces providing the rationale and drive toward behavior that could only be described as the darkest kind of evil. The institutions of the Nazi government and the complicity of the people could be said to be *possessed* by evil. At the same time the people were *responsible* for their behavior and the atrocities committed by their government.

Be careful in naming your demons. Princeton theologian Brian Blount attempted to describe the situation of Palestine in the time of Jesus. It was a dark world. Demons were blamed for every kind of human ailment, and for the most part, people were helpless before the onslaught. Exorcists were in high demand, and Jesus came preaching the rule of God on earth and illustrating his sermon with acts of miraculous healing and exorcism of demons. Early Christians seemed to have no problem with the world view, but they had trouble with the gossip that followed Jesus.

For one thing, how could the Son of God be subject to the petty powers of the Roman State and be humiliated by the tortuous death of crucifixion? Also early Christians had trouble with the accusation that Jesus was in league with the spiritual power of evil in the world. Four places in the Gospels, Jesus is accused of casting out demons through the power of Beelzebul the prince of demons. The embarrassment of early Christians was not the same as ours. The enemies of Jesus were not ridiculing Jesus as a superstitious fool for believing in demons. The demonic was the commonly accepted explanation for the appearance of evil. Everyone believed in the power of demons and attributed most diseases and disabilities to demon possession. It was a cultural aspect of life in the time of Jesus that was found throughout the Near East. In the Jewish community of Jesus, however,

all demons were viewed as rivals to the authority of God and extensions of the spiritual power of evil known as Satan or Beelzebul.

No one debated the reality of demons as the cause of human ailments, and no one was questioning the power of Jesus to throw the demons out. In fact, Jesus does not question the ability of other exorcists to successfully throw out the demons. The healing of the man who was mute, and we may assume deaf, was associated with casting out a demon. The challenge to Jesus was the ultimate insult: his power over evil must mean that *he* is evil. Jesus was being demonized by his detractors, and his disciples were being humiliated by the charge. The rational arguments of Jesus answering the charge were probably less important for the Pharisees and Scribes than they were for the followers of Jesus.

Like the person healed in Luke's Gospel, Willie was deaf and mute. He lived down the street from our family and was probably in his twenties. He made strange sounds and gestured to communicate. He hung out at the high school in the afternoon to watch football practice, or he could be seen in the local grocery store looking at the comic books. Occasionally he could be found sitting quietly in a pew during a worship service. Willie was an adult, but he always seemed more comfortable in the company of children. One day Danny, a neighbor kid, told me that Willie had been healed at church. Danny's church had a healing service and Willie was prayed over, incantations for exorcizing demons were said, and Willie spoke. (Some witnesses reported hearing something like "mama.") I saw Willie on the street a few days later, and he was just like always, gesturing and making strange sounds to get a point across. I was certain that Danny's church had been dishonest. Poor Willie had been exploited. No blood was drawn and perhaps one could call it a problem of ignorance or a victimless crime. But Willie was used for someone's personal aggrandizement.

Was the demonic at work here? The demonic was not Willie's disability but the claim of a church of a power and position that exceeds the grasp of human institutions.

Naming and confronting our demons is the first step in exorcism. Paul Tillich left Germany to teach in the US before the War. Out of his experience with Hitler, the demonic became a significant part of his theology, not in an attempt to find an outside cause of evil but in an attempt to understand how nations, corporations, churches, and persons can become so corrupt in their motives and behavior that they must be called evil. Tillich came down to a simple explanation. The demonic is a condition that occurs when a human entity, a finite institution or a person, claims the place and power of the infinite. When human fallible entities claim to be absolute, they pass over into the demonic. In short, when people play god, the demonic becomes real.

Wink (p. 43ff) applies this test to some of the biblical stories of demon possession. For example, the exorcism of demons from the man of Gerasa who lived among the tombs, who had superhuman strength and broke every restraint including chains, who supposedly terrified the people with his insanity. When Jesus confronted the tormented soul, the demons engaged in conversation. He asked their name. They replied "Legion," which Wink notes was badly botched in the TEV translation as a "mob." Rather the word speaks of a Roman military organization. The schizophrenic voices in the man's head causing him to hurt himself and to frighten others was not a disorderly mob, but a well-oiled military machine. When Jesus addressed the demons to cast them out, they pled not to be left on the countryside, so Jesus cooperated by sending them into a herd of swine, and the 2,000 swine rushed down the cliff into the sea. Wink notes that the real demons here were not in the demented soul, but in the political structure of the community. The community needed the man. They needed a scapegoat for their problems with Rome. He was their symbol of freedom which they could never express for themselves. The very worst thing that Jesus could do to that community was to throw out their demons. It was costly in terms of livestock, but it also cost them their token demoniac. The real demons were in the community. Wink concludes: "A megalomaniac like Hitler would get nowhere if he were not riding the cresting wave of resentment from millions of would-be megalomaniacs longing to

be released from the restraints of truth and civility. Like the thousands of sewage pipes draining from every house in a city into the central main, our inner demons feed the outer.”