

REFLECTION
September 26, 2021
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Mark 9:38-50

John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. “For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

What’s with words that start with “D?” There seem to be so many daunting and dangerous and deadly words...like the word *demon* or *disaster* that start with “D?”

Dehumanization. Discrimination. Demoralizing. Division.
Deception. Distraction. Degradation. Domination. Disinherited.
Debunking. Disappointment. Dismissive/Dissing, Despair.

These are all demon-like powers that haunt us. These are not only powers outside us in society or culture, but also powers within us—internalized specters and unresolved parts of ourselves that control us, until we have the courage to acknowledge and confront them—and sometimes, do battle against the. Sometimes we harbor demons unaware. We are both perpetrator and victim until someone points it out. When they do, we rightly feel angry, hurt, and ashamed.

Yes. There are real demons in this world—deadly and destructive. All that those “D” words point to. You don’t need to live in the first century to know about and believe in demons. Jesus was clear with his disciples. Confronting evil was his mission and he gave His Church the mission to protect and to advocate for the poor and marginalized in society. A Godly calling. Like a good shepherd, he chose to stand between the sheep and the wolves and created a space, a place to grow and flourish in Him.

“Do not stop those who confront evil,” Jesus told his disciples.
“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

He also said, “Don’t think so highly of yourself, and be so quick and dismissive of others who may not be known to us yet. The evil we are called to confront and defeat is pervasive and deadly.”

Dr. Howard Thurman had a name for this pervasive evil—the demons of the world that haunt the marginalized in society. He called them the *Hounds of Hell* and gave them each a name: Fear. Disception. Hatred. They infect and destroy the person and the soul.

As a young priest I was privileged to know The Reverend Dr. Marion Bascom. Dr. Bascom was a civil rights leader in Baltimore who served as Head Minister of Douglas Memorial Community Church on Madison Avenue in downtown Baltimore for 45 years. (Some clergy stay in one place even longer than I have.) Dr. Bascom marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Alabama, led the desegregation of many of the area's parks and restaurants, and was one almost 300 people arrested during a nonviolent protest at the segregated Gwynn Oak Amusement Park in the 60s. Dr. Bascom graciously invited me to be part of the Downtown Ministerial Alliance—a group of clergy serving the inner city who lunched together once a month and planned events together. I had a lot to learn in their presence. On one occasion, Dr. Bascom invited me to his study. He gave me two books by Dr. Howard Thurman and a suitcase. One book was dog-eared copy of *Jesus and the Disinherited* and the other was a well-worn book about the meaning of Spirituals. The suitcase was for my vestments. Upon reflection, I now know that he gave me everything I would need for 40 more years of ministry. It wasn't just lunch, a book, and a suitcase. He offered me table-fellowship, a social perspective, and trusted me with a mission. Your intent is serious when you show up with a suitcase! Years after I left Baltimore Dr. Bascom sent me a gift during Lent. It was this wooden cross on a purple leather strap with this note: "Don't wear it. Bear it." He died in 2012 at age 87. I so wish I could thank him for his kindness and life-shaping friendship—and how he *let me in*. He knew, "Whoever is not against us, is for us."

The books by Dr. Howard Thurman remind us that Jesus was a poor Jew who held a particular perspective—a divine perspective—the *fundamental brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind*—that challenged the elite and sought to bridge the gap—the chasm between the haves and the have nots in the world—from the familiar relationships in our lives to the most public and structural social and political systems. Central to Dr. Thurman's seminal thesis in *Jesus and the Disinherited* are what he describes as "the three hounds of Hell." Fear. Disception. And, Hatred. These three infect the souls of the poor and marginalized and weaken and corrode the very self, leaving only an elemental will to live and survive. In this morning's Reflection there is not enough time to explain...so suffice it to say, these *Hounds*, these demons—destroy not only the

individual but also the community if we fear one another, if we deceive or lie to one another, and if we proliferate hate— passing it from generation to generation. It is our mission to expose and confront the demons. It is our mission to cultivate trust and connection and a sense of individual respect and appreciation so critical to the health and well-being of all people.

I wish I could buy each of you a copy of Dr. Thurman's book, "Jesus and the Disinherited." I did type it out last year—did I send it to you? I will do this again. Now I see there is a newly published biography in 2021 titled, "Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman" by Peter Eisenstadt. It has good reviews. But there's nothing like reading Howard Thurman's own words.

As we get ready to start a new chapter at Epiphany when this Covid-thing is behind us, the new buildings are ready, mortgages are paid off, and you look for new leadership—I hope Dr. Thurman's perspective will continue to shape Epiphany's fellowship, perspectives, and mission. What we've been doing together for the past 35 years— and for years to come is more than Sunday lunch, a few books, and a suitcase. It is a calling. It is serious and intentional business. I hope you will be "Both feet in," "All hands on deck," and will remain strong together with your "Eyes on the prize."

God bless Epiphany, now and always.