Mark 1:21-28
Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 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.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

I’m a big fan of the books and especially the movies called “The Lord of the Rings.” If you haven’t seen them, they’re fantasy movies with elves and dwarves and wizards, and magic rings.

There’s a moment in the first movie when leaders of peoples from all over the land come together as a council to decide what must be done to destroy a magic ring which contains great evil and is able to give power to those who possess it. It gives unimaginable power to the most evil being in the land, if he can find it.

As they decide what to do with it, and who should have the duty and the honor to take care of disposing of the ring, which will be a dangerous journey, and a heavy burden, the leaders begin to argue. They fight about who is worthy of this journey and who is not, and slowly they begin to raise their voices, and point their fingers, and yell at one another. In the film version, the camera zooms in on the ring and in the reflection on the ring you see all these men and elves and dwarves arguing, and as the viewer you know that the ring is sowing discord. The ring itself is causing
disagreement, until the most humble of the beings, a small hobbit, speaks up and says, “I’ll take it,” and then again louder, “I will take it!”

And this hobbit, Frodo, says he will take it. His words, humbly serving others, not seeking the fame for himself, quiets the crowd, and stills the discord among the people.

There was an evil spirit at this meeting, and humbleness, and sincerity of purpose, service to his fellow beings, quieted the evil spirit, at least for a time.

In our Gospel today Jesus deals with a person with an unclean spirit.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue and the gospel of Mark tells us that a man with an unclean spirit comes in and yells out to Jesus, “What have you to do with us?” which in Greek is an idiom which can also be translated, “Leave us alone!” Maybe it was close to “You got a problem with me?”

“Leave me alone!” the evil spirit says.

And Jesus says, “Silence! Stop talking! Shut up you evil spirit! And get out!” Or maybe it was closer to. “silence. Leave him now.”

Because Jesus, unlike other miracle workers at the time, does not use special incantations or call on any other name to get rid of this spirit, he says, “Silence. and come out.”

Now it is our modern tendency, from our current perspective, with the knowledge we have of medical science and our understanding of mental illness to want to diagnose this man with the unclean or evil spirit. It is tempting to diagnose this person with a particular mental illness or perhaps to say he must have had epilepsy because after Jesus spoke, the man convulsed. And these 2000 years later diagnoses could be true; we don’t know.
What we do know is that the gospel says there was an unclean spirit, and Jesus said, Silence, and the spirit left.

So what of unclean spirits? Do we really believe in spirits, and possession and demons inside of people today? There are several ways for someone today to try to come to an understanding of what the gospel writer means when they say, “unclean spirit.”

I know people who would say that demon possession is nonsense. I know people who would say that they are fighting spiritual warfare daily.

Have you ever been in a group of people where there seemed to be a negativity in the air? Have you ever been near someone who you knew meant you ill will? Have you ever been in a disagreement with someone who seemed to be arguing with you out of pure malice? Out of pure hate?

An evil spirit may be a personal one that we have all experienced. Perhaps it is the spirit of selfishness, that says that what I want is more important than what you want. A Spirit that says, what I do is more important than what you do, I want the glory. Not you, not him, not her, not God, but me.

Or maybe a spirit that is not clean is bigger than one person. Perhaps an unclean spirit is one that operates behind the scenes pulling strings and moving curtains so that what we think is an even playing field really isn’t. In our work lives, within economic systems, within our culture systems have been put in place many years ago and today by people all collectively agreeing to unjust and unclean ideas with which we continue to work through.

Our nation continues to deal with the spirit of racism. Our culture continues to deal with the spirit of unfair treatment and objectification of women. Our world continues to deal with the unclean spirit of thinking that some people are worth so much less than others that they can be treated as
slaves. We know that we live in a world, in a state, that continues to deal with substance abuse. We all are aware of someone whose life has been ruined by the spirit of domestic violence and abuse.

Do evil and unclean spirits still exist? Yes. And the lies of these spirits leave destruction and sadness and pain and injustice in their wake.

In the middle of this cacophony of spirits, in the middle of this disagreement and confusion, in the face of personal evil, in the middle of unfair and abusive systems comes Jesus who says, “Silence. Come out of our lives, you evil.” Jesus yells, “Silence, evil! Leave the oppressed alone!”

As humans we live with difficult and sometimes evil spirits in people we know, in the systems we try to navigate each day, and sometimes within ourselves. As we try to deal with this, Jesus comes in and says, “Silence. I will take it. I will take your pain, and injustice, and cast it out.”

May we give Jesus the pain we cannot bear. May we work with Jesus to aid in the healing of others. May we strive with Christ toward justice for our neighbors.

Let us pray. Jesus, where there is evil, you call for it to leave. Where there is injustice you call for dignity. Where there is pain, you cry out for healing. May we hear your call for silence. Help us to turn away and rebuke spirits which lead us away from God. Rather turn us toward your advocate, our helper, the Holy Spirit which you promised will bring peace. Amen.