

SPIRITUALITY
[written in oral form]

Mark 1:29-39
5th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B

February 7, 2021
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Spirituality

Everyone has a spirit, and most everyone seems to be interested in spirituality. However, too often the notion of spirituality is vague and superficial.

I do think many are confusing wellbeing with spirituality.
They seem to have a pursuit to "feel" good, but more on that later.

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At first I thought of referring to the experts--the great mystics for clarification.  
I had some delightful quotes picked out from Thomas Merton, John of the Cross, Bernard of Clairvaux and others.

Yet, even though they are great sources for insight, citations without context can be limiting, as if we are trying to capture and contain spirituality with a simple definition.

Still, I have to include one reference. Catherine of Siena (1347-80) referred to God's Spirit as "fiery abyss of charity" and as a "mad lover." That may prompt some contemplation?

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In the church realm, we tend to have a limited concept of spirituality. We tend to restrain our understanding of our spirit and God's Spirit. ...BUT, there are many kinds of spirits. Spirituality involves more than just God's Spirit, and the Bible confirms this to be the case.

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I think spirit is mystical energy. It is energy.  
It is NOT about emotions, although it can affect the emotions.  
We say, "Team Spirit", but that is really about emotions.

Spiritual energy can be most everywhere: with plants, animals and of course with humans.  
To be sure, spirits can have a cognitive ability. Recall, they talked to Jesus.

Moreover, I do not think spirits are confined to our construction of time.

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When Katherine was about four years old, we were living in Kansas. We decided to walk over to the cemetery since it was a nice moderate summer day. That means the temperature was only about 100 F. That is 38 C. <

The cemetery was near the church with lots of green space and a pond.  
As we were walking around the place, Katherine stopped near the older section. Leslie and I kept walking. Then we noticed Katherine was fixated on one particular gravestone.

We walked to her and asked what she was doing?  
She replied, "I am talking to a girl."  
Puzzled, we read the worn out words on the old gravestone.  
The grave was for a four year old girl who died in the 1880's.

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I dare say she had a sweet conversation.
We asked Katherine to say good-bye to her friend because we needed to leave.

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If that true story was unsettling, then our perception of spirituality is dangerously too limited.  
We are ignoring too much.

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I too have had a number of interactions with apparitions--spirits beyond time.
Spiritual energy is most everywhere.

In addition, I do think there is a DNA spiritual connection.
Our relatives from the past do connect us.

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Like many people, my interest in spirituality began in my late teens and early 20's.  
Carlos Castaneda introduced me to indigenous spirituality.  
Herman Hesse prompted me to examine Eastern spirituality.  
Ram Das and Thomas Merton also open me to think beyond the tangible.

I think it is prudent to be aware.... Awareness reduces fear.  
And thankfully, we need not fear.

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Well,.....this is a sermon, so onto the text.

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It was the Sabbath day, and Jesus with others returned from the synagogue.  
Jesus was informed about Simon's mother-in-law's illness.  
He simply touched her.  
The term "lifted her up" is an Aramaic idiom for "He healed her."  
A simple touch? He healed her.  
There was energy in that touch, healing energy.

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Mark did not have to point out to a contemporary reader that Jesus broke a Sabbath rule about healing on the Sabbath.
Mark was sly that way.

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Word spread, and the whole town gathered outside the house.  
The Sabbath ends at sundown, so they waited to bring people to be healed.  
The sick...And.. the **demon possessed** were brought to Jesus.  
The demon possessed,..and no one was shocked or surprised.

Mark mentions demons more than the other Gospel writers.

In this passage, Jesus forbids the demons from speaking because they knew who Jesus was.

This is called the messianic secret.

I suppose people were not ready to hear who Jesus really was.

In Mark, Jesus did not self identify as the Messiah, yet he embraced his powers and unique relationship with God.

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The part about the demons stands out, and also noteworthy is verse 35.

There it states that in the dark, early morning Jesus went out alone to pray.

He went to a deserted place, without distractions.

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Another aspect stands out, and it is action.

After the mother-in-law was cured, she began serving others.

Perhaps this was her duty, or maybe it was from gratitude. ??

After Jesus had spiritually restorative time in prayer, he resumed his ministry / his calling.

Being touched by God's Spirit leads to action.

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Demons.

We do not talk much about demons, but maybe we should.

But first, I don't know about you, but I cannot erase the image of gargoyles and disfigured creatures when I hear Demons.

So, I will refer to them / it as negative spiritual energy... or a destructive spirit.

In the N.T., when they are mentioned, it was NOT a misdiagnosis of mental or emotional illnesses.

The references were people consumed by a negative spirit.

Moreover, the Gospels are clear that those negative spirits were terrified of Jesus. They knew a higher power was present.

The cure for expelling negative spirits is faith in God.

No potion, no ritual is necessary. God's engaged presence is sufficient. We need not fear.

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Nevertheless, we should be mindful about such negative spirits. They oppose all that is Christ. They are destructive.

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And, being overwhelmed by a negative spirit happens.

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I was once in the presence of someone who I quickly realized was fully possessed by evil.

I was extremely uncomfortable; it was chilling. I left as soon as I could.  
Such possession is a reality.

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Now, before you start imaging a horror movie with evil spirits lurking about like a Corona virus ready to attack, hear this:

It does Not work that way.
Negative spirits do Not invade people. They do not suddenly possess people. Likewise, neither does God's Spirit.

Strangely, we humans invite them in,... and then they can be overwhelming.

Our choices and passions, such as greed, lust and selfishness invite them in.
Our associations with others under the influence is a factor, too. Collective evil is real.
Consider the assault on the U.S. capital.
The negative energy moved the crowd, and it was fueled by lies and fanatical rhetoric.
Negative spirits and collective evil are dangerous and destructive.
Negative spirits do not invade without permission, yet they can be overwhelming once allowed in.

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Similarly, God's Spirit does Not attack and invade us.  
However, the absence of God's Spirit is very uncomfortable and even tormenting. We need God's Spirit to thrive in us.

God's Spirit is love.....and love is a verb.

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Sometimes people think God's Spirit is an analgesic.

Wanting to have internal peace and seeking to be one with the world is fine, and God's Spirit can help that, I think.

Yet, the Bible is pretty clear: God's Spirit is for a purpose / for action.

Paul lists numerous gifts of the Spirit, and it is far from a complete list.
All but one is for the purpose of helping others.
The gift of speaking in tongues is to help those lacking faith.

Still, they are all for action / for a purpose.
Thomas Merton came to realize this, and his purpose became social justice.

Possessing God's Spirit will give us purpose for action.
The mother-in-law waited on others.
Jesus healed, cured people and proclaimed the Good News.
God's Spirit to us is for a reason.

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We are all spiritual creations. Each of us has a spirit, and God offers us God's Spirit.... We often call them gifts.  
To be sure, God's Spirit is love. It is love in action.

God's Spirit is not some abstract feel good sensation.  
This is why we need a faith community, so we can understand that.  
Those who try to be spiritually filled on their own can end up with superstitions or worse. They can be deceived.

We need each other.  
And, to have a meaningful, purposeful life, we need God's Spirit.

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We are all spiritual creatures.
There are spirits all around us.
God's Spirit is near.

It comes down to inviting God's Spirit in. Yet, some negative spirits may need to be expelled, first. Traditionally, we called that repentance.
But, do not worry about the negative spirits.
God's Spirit is more powerful, and God will deal with the negative, if we are open to God.
The negative spirits are terrified of God / of the Spirit of Love.

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I realize the things I have said are a bit unusual, and maybe that's okay. And, I am still learning, too.

If you hold onto only one thing from this sermon, I hope it is the image of Jesus going off on his own to pray.

Jesus left the distractions and connected with God.
It really is that simple.

Life and the spiritual domain is complicated and sometimes strange.

Connecting and inviting God's Spirit in is very simple.

Oh, ... we do not control the outcome, just as we do not control God.

We do make the choice to invite God to be with our spirit.

After that,.....???.....like I said, life is complicated and strange.
We all have different gifts and different paths.

Regardless, God gives us a purpose and the ability to take action.
We need God's Spirit because there are negative spirits out there.
And, the world needs more people with the "Fiery abyss of charity."

