

## “Silence and Speech; Race and Gospel”

Sermon preached at the Congregational Church of Salisbury, UCC  
Salisbury, Connecticut

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*Text: Mark 1:29-39*

<sup>29</sup> As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. <sup>30</sup> Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. <sup>31</sup> He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. <sup>32</sup> That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. <sup>33</sup> And the whole city was gathered around the door. <sup>34</sup> And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. <sup>35</sup> In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. <sup>36</sup> And Simon and his companions hunted for him. <sup>37</sup> When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” <sup>38</sup> He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” <sup>39</sup> And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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### 1

Last Sunday we heard of Jesus silencing and expelling an unclean spirit that had possessed a man. The Gospel leaves open many possible understandings of “unclean spirit.” It could be an addiction. It could be a mental illness. It could be a malevolent presence that seeks to molest and destroy.

The Gospel leaves room to reflect on different ways that an “unclean spirit” — or “demon,” as in today’s verses — torments a person, causing harm to the individual and, often, harm to those around. Demons are the forces that diminish life or distort relationships. You have heard me describe God’s *shalom* as wholeness, harmony, justice, and joy: demons are the opposite of *shalom*, actively subverting God’s vision for humanity and creatures and creation.

Today’s gospel passage, with its haunting talk of demons, leads me to reflect on my one particular malevolent force: racism and white supremacy, sometimes called America’s Original Sin. It is on my mind this week especially, as we have just entered Black History Month.

Eight years ago, after George Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering the unarmed Trayvon Martin, a response began to sweep through social media: “Black Lives Matter.” The following year, after the unpunished killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, the statement gained reach and prominence.

Some faith communities took up the call, putting “Black Lives Matter” on signboards and banners. In Framingham, MA, “Black Lives Matter” was hung over the sign identifying the Massachusetts Conference of the UCC. Next day, it was vandalized. Someone took spray paint, crossed out “Black” and wrote in “All.” All lives matter.

To their credit, the folks at the Mass Conference left up the vandalized sign. They added another message, next to it, reading: “Let’s talk.”

Under cover of darkness a person had gone to the banner at the church offices and crossed out “Black,” an act painfully reminiscent of centuries of deprecating and deprecating Blackness. In its place, the person wrote “All Lives Matter.” It is true that all lives matter. What makes it true? A gut feeling hints that it is true. For Christians, far more important than a gut feeling is that the scripture declares it to be true: God made all lives and pronounced them very good; that is why all lives matter. But sometimes a statement that is true can be unhelpful. Sometimes a true statement becomes a way to hide or distort a deeper truth.

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## 2

All lives do matter. And yet when the dominant traditions of our culture belong to people who have a history of exploiting and devaluing persons of color, then to say “All lives matter” tells only an idealized truth, a truth out of context, that painfully ignores the real experience of suffering. An example: two students of my alma mater, Union Theological Seminary in New York City, joined a street protest. They behaved the same way. But when the police came near, the black student was handcuffed and thrown into a van while an officer whispered into the white student’s ear: “Just walk away.”

All lives do matter. In God’s eyes all lives matter. Yet even assuming that every person worshiping today earnestly believes that every life matters — there’s no way to look at the treatment of human beings in this society and find evidence that’s how we as a people behave.

Because while all lives matter in theory, and all lives certainly matter in the Word of God — it is painfully clear that in the criminal justice system, white lives matter more than black lives. On the streets, white lives are better protected than black lives. In real estate sales and mortgage applications, Black applicants face far more obstacles. In schools, Black students are more likely to have their homework checked than their peers from other groups.<sup>1</sup>

Saying “All lives matter” distracts from a deeper truth. Until black persons experience that their lives matter, until there is actual, equal treatment by cops, prosecutors, employers, school districts, financial institutions, civic institutions, faith institutions — until we disassemble and delegitimize and discard the systems that give supremacy to whites — until then, the deeper truth lies in the necessary declaration that “Black Lives Matter.”

I imagine that some of you, perhaps many of you, have already declared the same thing. I’m making a supposition that there are many in this congregation who recognize that racism is a problem. You might even join me in calling racism *demonic* — a Biblical word that describes what we are up against.

In North Miami Beach a National Guard sergeant practicing at a police gun range saw bullet-riddled targets — that were mugshots of black men. The sergeant recognized one of those photos: her brother. The police chief defended the department. He denied any racial profiling: said officers used images of people of all races. For target practice.

It was not much of a defense. Essentially the captain insisted that his department demonically, systematically, denigrates and denies the humanity of everyone who has had a mugshot taken: not just persons who are black. It is akin to saying that all lives matter until you’ve entered the criminal justice system: then you become a number and a target.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://thenewpress.com/books/black-stats>

But here, in the middle of an hour given to praising the God whom you and I know in Christ Jesus, we dare to search out a Word of truth that insists on dignity and integrity and well-being for every creature and creation. And we ask: what does the gospel require of us?

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### 3

The story for today points toward one answer for followers of Jesus. *Recognize the demonic voices, and refuse to accept them.*

Demons come in many forms, but always they do this: they claim control of the story. A demon mocks the mysterious beauty of life in creation and all creatures, and the Gospel tells us that Jesus' response was to silence and expel them. A demon triggers fear, tempts you to fight or flee, instead of falling on your knees in gratitude for God's grace. A demon says that the real racial problem is so-called "black on black violence," as though that is occurring outside the centuries and structures of White supremacy. A demon white-washes the truth of God's unconditional love and our failures to live into God's promise.

How we perceive each other is carefully taught, as the haunting song goes — taught by families, by schools, by media, by faith communities, by corporations, by governments. When we learn to perceive others as a threat, and when we have accustomed ourselves to the unequal distribution of earth's resources and society's benefits, then demons still have us in their grip — you and me, the cop trying to do a job with integrity, the kids playing with fake guns, the people carrying real guns. At our best, we are the many people with demons seeking healing grace from the hand of Jesus.

Demonic is whatever causes us to see another as less than beloved of God, as made in the image of God, worthy of dignity and integrity. And demonic describes the hideous part of our social makeup, from the racism of founding documents to the allowable distortions of truth in our legal system. What are Christians to do?

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### 4

The gospel says this: cast out demons, and *proclaim the message*. God's realm of grace is not only possible: it is already among us.

The gospel says, proclaim the story that is ours by baptism: we are creatures of God's grace, charged with the holy task of treasuring the wholeness of life. That means a fierce resolve to denounce any speech and any practice that threatens the wholeness of life. Proclaiming God's realm means dedicating ourselves to insisting on each creature's dignity at any cost, healing wounds, and devoting ourselves to the work of right relationship.

The gospel says, tell the Good News of God who comes in the identity of the person of color whose mugshot was hung out for target practice. The Gospel says: choose to act toward that person as you would act to your savior.

Dorothy Day said, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least." I have carried dislike for others in my heart; I have carried disdain and worse. I have that much to overcome, if I am to love God. Perhaps you do, as well.

We may never free the world of demons, but don't let that stop you from confronting them. When you hear those demons speak up in the workplace or the community center or the

family dinner table, answer back: “You have every right to your opinion — but why, oh why does not your heart break with tears and rage at the suffering of others?”

You notice what Jesus did: he denied the demons their reality-warping speech, and he tended to all the people whose hearts and minds and bodies had been overtaken. Jesus silenced demons. He would not allow them to speak. Instead he listened to those who suffered, in by bringing them the presence of God’s own loving self, he healed.

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## 5

*We follow Jesus by listening to the stories of others.* The stories that humanize others, that foster compassion, that promote intimacy: they expel the demons, as surely as did Jesus.

Then we can begin to proclaim the good news: our existence is actually ruled by the God of wholeness, harmony, justice, and joy. That is the gospel truth. God’s gracious realm is becoming real right now, healing our deepest intransigence and bringing to birth the deepest dreams of wholeness, harmony, justice, and joy.

In case this is the first sermon you have ever heard — and just in case this is the last sermon you will ever hear — let me say this: God is unleashing an incomparable healing in the world — a love that listens intently and speaks passionately — and God’s best bearer of healing power is you. You are the ones who reconstitute the world. Go: proclaim! Heal! Love!