



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"Expansive Community"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On January 28th, 2024, from Mark 1:29-45

Progressive Christians don't know what to do with stories about demons. Any reading of the gospels reveals that Jesus' ministry included three activities: he was a teacher, a healer, and an exorcist. And we are good with the first two, but we treat the third one like Bruno in the film *Encanto*, we don't talk about demons. It's like the first rule of *Fight Club* is: you do not talk about *Fight Club*. The first rule of progressive Christianity is: you do not talk about demons. You can visit a progressive Christian's home, and they will happily talk with you about sex, politics, and religion at the dinner table, but don't bring up casting out demons. It is the only subject that's off-limits and totally taboo. Talk of demons can ruin a meal. If you don't believe me, try it out today during the church-wide lunch.

When I was in seminary, the scholarly consensus was that the first century world lacked any knowledge of modern science or Western medicine, therefore people living in that "primitive" time only had the language of the spiritual world to describe people they perceived as speaking erratically or behaving strangely. Modern scholars did not believe people could be possessed by demons, so they came up with two possible explanations for what was going on: a) epilepsy or b) mental illness. First, we need to acknowledge how harmful and offensive it is to people with epilepsy and mental illness to associate their experiences with demonic possession. Second, if the environmental crisis has taught us anything it's that we should not turn our noses up at ancient knowledge or indigenous wisdom. Instead of explaining it away, we should ask why were so many people possessed in first-century Galilee?

During the Algerian War in the '50s, Paris-trained psychiatrist and Martinique philosopher, Franz Fanon, became the director of a mental hospital where he witnessed countless people possessed by spirits. Possession had become rampant in Algeria under French colonialism, which brought violence into the homes and minds of the Algerian people. Their situation as a colonized people seemed intractable and Fanon said demonic possession was one of the ways Algerians resisted the French colonial regime. Fanon claimed that through possession the colonized avoided the catastrophe of direct conflict with the occupying force by "choosing a lesser evil." He believed the invasion and occupation of French forces generated a response that was self-defensively creative and debilitatingly mystifying. Demonic possession, for Fanon, was a deeply spiritual and self-protective activity, which demonstrated that wherever there is power there is always resistance.ⁱ



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In the '70s the Malaysian government established free-trade zones to encourage multinational corporations to set up manufacturing plants and cut costs by hiring young women as a cheap and easily controlled labor force. Within a decade these corporations were exploiting over 47,000 girls from *Kampong* society. However, managers and health care officials quickly became concerned about frequent outbreaks of possession that happening the production lines and shutting down factories. Psychologists and medical experts blamed the incidents on the low education, superstitious beliefs, and personal failings of the women, diagnosing it as "epidemic hysteria" or "mass psychogenic illness." However, one researcher named Aihwa Ong found that the women's sudden subjection to the harsh conditions of factory work had disrupted their indigenous cultural convictions and the episodes of possession were an expression of fear and protest to violations of their morality.ⁱⁱ According to Aihwa Ong, possession was the *Kampong* women's resistance to the forces of oppression.

When Jesus was born, the people of Galilee had been oppressed by the Romans for generations. Rome terrorized people by devastating their villages, slaughtering inhabitants, enslaving survivors, and publicly crucifying the leaders. There were two pillars of Roman subjugation: military conquest and economic exploitation. Conquest devastated the community and exploitation ripped apart the fabric of family and community in the village. The historian Josephus records several accounts of Roman violence in Galilee that caused considerable trauma. In 52 BCE the Roman warlord Cassius carried out a mass enslavement of 30,000 people on the Sea of Galilee. A generation later the Roman legion terrorized the city of Sepphoris by crucifying a thousand people along the road to Nazareth who were suspected of resistance.

Losing a family member or two would have catastrophic effects for people's ability to survive in a what were already subsistence level conditions, leading to debt, servitude, hunger, and malnutrition. Exacerbating and intensifying an already precarious existence were the demands for tribute, taxes, and tithes from multiple layers of occupiers and local religious rulers, whose steady escalation rapidly increased the poverty of the people. The ability of neighbors to come to aid struggling families was exhausted as they also felt the ever-tightening pinch of supporting themselves until the next harvest while rendering up their own burdensome taxes.

Villagers were forced to take loans at high interest rates from aristocratic families who controlled surplus resources, further concentrating wealth in the hands of a small few. Unable to repay their spiraling debts, peasants were forced to yield up the children and family members to debt-slavery and lost control of their land to wealthy creditors.



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The everyday lives of people in Galilee were a struggle for survival, and a serious risk of premature death during times of famine. Why were so many people possessed in Galilee? It's the same reason there were so many people possessed in Algeria and Malaysia. Generations of military conquest and economic exploitation had caused widespread hunger and malnutrition. The compounding generational trauma sparked an outbreak of illness and disease, and possession as a form of resistance to the invading and occupying forces of imperial oppression.

Jesus' ministry of teaching, healing, and casting out demons was a direct response to the oppression of Rome and a radical attempt to address the social conditions of his people. Evangelical Christians tend to spiritualize Jesus' ministry of healing and exorcising by making them miracles that prove Christ's divinity. But we progressives are not much better when we spiritualize these stories into simplistic metaphors of kindness and compassion. Both perspectives neglect the material reality of what life was like for the average Galilean and why Jesus' ministry was received as good news by people at that time and location in history. We cannot understand what scripture means for us today if we do not understand what it meant for the people living in the first century. We need to know what it meant for people then if we want to know what it means for us now. Jesus' ministry meant both spiritual deliverance and material liberation from the starvation, sickness, possession, and oppression caused by Roman invasion and occupation.

But Jesus didn't begin his ministry by staging a protest on the front steps of Caesar's Palace or gathering a revolutionary army to take on the Roman Legion. No, Jesus began his ministry in the synagogue of his own hometown Nazareth and in cities and towns in the surrounding region of Galilee. He did not start with a press conference or by organizing a mass meeting. He started by walking along a shoreline and calling out to a few poor brothers struggling to eke out a living in an exploitative fishing industry to come and follow him—Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

Jesus began his ministry by responding to the needs of the people closest to him, coming to visit the home of Peter's mother-in-law, who was sick with a fever and lifting her up. The intimacy and proximity with which Jesus' ministry began is unbelievably stunning. From Peter's mother-in-law to the man with a skin disease and all the sick and possessed in between; we find a common thread in these stories. To liberate people from invading forces of oppression Jesus acted to reconnect people with their true selves, to bring folks back into the community, and welcome them home. Whether he was teaching, healing, or casting out demons, Jesus was working to cultivate belonging, because liberation starts with belonging.



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We can't live without it. Belonging is necessary for our survival. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, belonging is essential for human beings to thrive and there is research which demonstrates that belonging is as important to our lives as food, water, and shelter. We discovered this during the pandemic. Whenever we experience a lack of belonging, we are deprived of one of the basic building blocks of life. But what's counterintuitive about belonging is that we often imagine it's something we receive from outside ourselves through other people and communities: partners, families, friends, neighbors, churches, schools, work. But in her book, *You Belong*, Ethiopian American Sebene Selassie writes, "We cannot find belonging with others until we truly belong to ourselves, and that can't happen until we make the decision to work to know ourselves and then embrace what we've discovered."ⁱⁱⁱ That's why we can be surrounded by families, friends, neighbors, and community and still feel like we don't belong because we do not belong to ourselves.

If you look closely, every one of Jesus' interactions with people in need ended with him bringing them back to themselves—giving their lives back. In Western medicine, a fever is seen as a symptom, but in the first century it was understood as an intrusive agent, which is not far off if the fever is the result of a virus or bacteria that has taken up residence in the body. Sickness, fever, disease, and possession were all interpreted in the same way—as a sign that a foreign agent has invaded a person and occupied their body. And they believed when a foreign occupying force has taken over a person that the host no longer has power or control over their lives, and they no longer belonged to themselves.

The parallel between what the people of Galilee experienced from the invasion and occupation of Rome and what Galileans experienced from sickness and possession is obvious. That's what colonization feels like for people under an occupying force; like every aspect of one's existence has been invaded and occupied. So, in the gospel stories whenever Jesus intervened, he always removed the invader, casted out the foreign agent, expelled the occupying force, so a person who was sick or possessed could come back home, return to community, and belong to themselves again. That's how liberation happens—it happens when all the foreign agents and occupying forces are exorcised from our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls so that we can be free to return to God, ourselves, and each other—to truly belong.



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The question that stories of healing and exorcism beckons us to ask is: who do you belong to? Do you belong to yourself or to something else? Do you belong to yourself or a fever? Do you belong to yourself or an illness? Do you belong to yourself or a disease? Do you belong to yourself or an unclean spirit? Do you belong to yourself or a demon? Do you belong to ourselves or a foreign agent? Do you belong to yourself or an invasive species? Do you belong to yourself or an occupying force? Do you belong to yourself or an empire? Do you belong to yourself or America? Do you belong to yourself or a political party? Do you belong to yourself or to an ideology? Do you belong to yourself or a mythology? A lot of folks think they belong to themselves, or God, but they really belong to someone or something else.

Outside forces are constantly trying to invade and occupy us, to take up residence in our lives; seeking to control us, own us, subjugate us, dominate us, and ultimately to take our lives away from us so we no longer belong to ourselves, God, or each other, but to them! So, we need to decide who we want to belong to and then follow Jesus with all our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls because he is the one who has the power free us from outside forces, return our lives to us, bring us back to ourselves, so that we belong again. This is not a 'once saved always saved' activity we engage in one time, and then we're done for the rest of our lives. We must constantly be working every single day to belong to ourselves, because it is only when we belong to ourselves that we can truly belong to anyone or anything else.

As Brené Brown said, "Stop walking through the world looking for confirmation that you don't belong. You will always find it because you've made that your mission. Stop scouring people's faces for evidence that you're not enough. You will always find it because you've made that your goal. True belonging and self-worth are not goods; we don't negotiate our value with the world. The truth about who we are lives in our hearts. Our call to courage is to protect our wild heart against constant evaluation, especially your own. No one belongs here more than you."^{iv}

She claims, "True belonging is not passive. It's not just joining a group, fitting in, pretending, or selling out because it's safer. It's a practice that requires us to be vulnerable, and uncomfortable, and learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are. True belonging takes tremendous courage to knowingly walk into hard moments. Belonging so fully to yourself that you're willing to stand [in your truth] in an untamed wilderness. It is a place as dangerous as it is breathtaking, as sought after as is feared. The wilderness can often feel unholy because we can't control it, but it turns out to be the place of true belonging, and it's the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand."^v



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This year we are drawing the circle wider at Myers Park Baptist Church by practicing the expansive inclusivity, boundless hospitality, and ever-widening sense of belonging we see in the life of Jesus. But we cannot do it alone. Our Deacons cannot do it for you. Our ministers cannot do it for you. I cannot do it for you. Our leaders are only a part of the plan. To be a truly inclusive community of spirituality and social justice, every single person in this church is going to have to take responsibility for their own faith, their own lives, and their own sense of belonging. Expansive community is not something to consume or passively participate in. It's not something that is made for us; but created by us—rolling up our sleeves, getting involved, taking responsibility, and doing our part for the sake of the common good.

Some people say there's a volunteer crisis in America and the church today. If that's the case, it's because people have come to believe they belong to something other than themselves. But we don't belong to our jobs or our hobbies. We don't belong to the Republican or Democratic party. We don't belong to Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, or even NPR. We don't belong to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, or even *The Charlotte Observer*. We don't belong to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and especially not X. We don't belong to Walmart, Target, Amazon, Lowes, or even Lululemon. We don't belong to Samsung, Google, Microsoft, or even Apple (as I preach from this iPad).

We don't belong to America, North Carolina, Charlotte, or even the Myers Park neighborhood. We don't belong to the cold, the flu, RSV, cancer, or Covid-19. We don't belong to any sickness, illness, disease, bacteria, virus, or fungus, that takes over our bodies. We don't belong to any foreign agent, invasive species, or occupying force like Roman occupation. We don't belong to the powers, principalities, demons, or unclean spirits. We don't belong to the addictive ideologies of nationalism, classism, a caste system, patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia, or whiteness. We belong to God, ourselves, and each other and that is it!

Everything else in this world can only provide us with a false sense of belonging. We follow Jesus because we know he has the power to free us from all the outside forces that are trying to steal our lives away from us. And we follow him so we that can recover who we truly are, take our lives back, and come home to ourselves. We cannot fully experience the life, love, and liberation that comes with expansive community until we discover the joy of belonging to ourselves first and foremost. But when we learn to belong to ourselves, to God, and to each other, then like Jesus, we too will bring healing, deliverance, and belonging to the world.



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ⁱ Franz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, Chevalier, H. (trans.), Grove Press, New York, 1959.

ⁱⁱ Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*, SUNY, 1987.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sebene Selassie, *You Belong*, HarperOne, NY, 2022.

^{iv} Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, Random House, NY, 2017.

^v Ibid.