

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Ordinary Times

January 27-28, 2018

Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1Corinthians 7: 32-35; Mark 1: 21-28

Preacher: Sr. Chris Wagner

In his book *The Road to Character*, author David Brooks gives the reader example after example of historic figures who lived their lives with a stalwart attention to doing the right thing.

Their self-discipline and subjugation of ego often took a great toll on their lives, but they sought a higher goal than their own comfort.

Some of the people that Brooks holds up as possessing great character are Frances Perkins, Dorothy Day, George Marshall and Mary Anne Evans (aka George Eliot)—often flawed people, not household names, but people who have had great influence on our world.

We might say that these historic figures were super humans, living lives larger than any of us could aspire to, but I think that reasoning lacks imagination and commitment to our own higher ideals. Jesus, of course, epitomizes the person of great character, the person who places others above self; the person who does the right thing despite the cost. And Jesus has enough confidence in us to invite us to follow his example. Should we not at least try to follow in his footsteps?

Mark's Gospel today gives us an example of strength of character, a strength we can draw on often in our daily lives. We might skim over this scripture as another story of Jesus stopping to evict a demon, an unclean spirit. Jesus does this many times in the Gospels.

It struck me that while I have never seen a demon or a possessed person, I have seen plenty of disrupters who appear to stand in the way of truth, light, faith, goodness, equity, justice and love. The man with the unclean spirit in today's Gospel disrupted the teaching of Jesus that the people found enriching, enlightening, freeing and new. The unclean spirit tried to stop the flow of Jesus' message with suspicion, and accusation not grounded in truth.

As with all other Gospel stories of Jesus interacting with demons and unclean spirits, he demanded they stop, he called out the falsehood and evil in their words and actions and pointed back to the Gospel as the good news that leads to life.

It seems we shake our heads a lot these days at the unbelievable disruption of what we hold as decent, truthful, honest, and ethically and morally appropriate. Sometimes I find myself so stunned at outrageous behavior and words I am speechless.

Speechless is what we cannot be. The people that Brooks highlights in his book, and of course, Jesus, were not speechless in the face of “unclean spirits”—no matter the cost. Who are the unclean spirits we meet today? Do we have the character to “speak truth to untruth,” “speak truth to power?” Can we bear the cost of speaking publicly for those who are without power? Can we model the teaching of Jesus in our daily interactions with others?

Brooks emphasizes in his book that it is a road to character that needs to be traveled; character is built. Jesus did not find his path easy. We are fragile people who sometimes find it hard to be brave and we struggle to pay the price of living the Gospel. Each time we call out the disrupter in our midst is a step on the journey of building character and building the reality of the Gospel in our world.