

Sunday, January 29, 2012: Mark 1:21–28

What animates our being? What possesses or consumes us?

by [Gretchen E. Ziegenhals](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

My daughter was eating lunch with a friend at an inner-city diner when they saw a painfully thin young woman stagger down the center of street outside, her face and limbs contorted and flailing, her eyes rolled back into her head. Soon a police car pulled up. An officer cautiously approached the woman, whose limbs were moving spastically. After four more squad cars had arrived, police began searching the woman for drugs or other clues to her odd behavior. Finally they handcuffed her, led her to a police car and drove her away. This woman's affliction may have been drug-related or it may have been caused by a physical ailment.

The man in the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus was teaching had "an unclean spirit." What was he doing in the temple? Had he come to disrupt Jesus' teaching or challenge his ministry? This spirit recognized Jesus immediately, named him Jesus of Nazareth and predicted its own end: "Have you come to destroy us?" Jesus—the "one who has authority," who knows the mind of God and who lives out God's will—commanded the spirit to be silent and to come out of the man. The crowd recognized and commented on his authority.

The dramatic way in which the man is convulsed while being exorcised and the cries that he utters distance us from him just as my daughter was distanced from the woman on the street by being behind a pane of restaurant glass. Both the man and the woman are spectacles, one on the street and one in the temple, and we cannot help but stare, most of us unable to wrap our minds around what it might mean to be demon-possessed or convulsing from an overdose of drugs.

If we are honest, however, we recognize that we all are possessed—by jealousies, addictions, pride, unhealthy life styles, excessive worries or unforgiving spirits—issues that need to be exorcised in order for us to live the lives that God intended for us. Mark shows us that when an unclean spirit (from the Greek *daimon*) animates or possesses us, it is in opposition or contrary to the spirit of Christ, the spirit of a healthy and whole life.

What animates our being at the beginning of this new year? What possesses or consumes us? How can we cleanse ourselves and be released from the unhealthy things that possess us? How can we fill our lives instead with habits and activities that will support our lives as clergy or laypeople? First we need to be clear about whose authority we follow.

My friends Willow and Horace are strong lay leaders in their church, excellent parents of a large family and selfless leaders in the community. They once told me that they are committed to never making a decision based on fear. This is the faithful mind-set of a Christian couple whose days are rooted in God's authority, love and providence. They are "possessed" by their confidence in God's goodness and grace, despite the challenges they face.

Clergy too need to cultivate the conditions under which excellent, healthy and vital ministry can thrive. The Lilly Endowment's Sustaining Pastoral Excellence project has supported pastors of nearly every Christian tradition over the past ten years through sustained Bible study, theological reflection, spiritual renewal and opportunities to participate in peer groups. SPE has discovered that excellent ministry is most likely to flourish when pastors regularly do these things: participate in a structured community of peers; embody a life of faith by practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, Bible study or sabbath; and cultivate their imaginations through

"border crossing" (talking with new people, reading widely, traveling, visiting an art museum).

In *Pursuing Pastoral Excellence: Pathways to Fruitful Leadership*, Paul E. Hopkins describes the lives of seven pastors who are animated by habits that encourage fruitful ministry—habits such as integrity, resilience, a sense of story and a passion for justice. He tells compelling stories about each pastor that help the reader "reconnect to the vine that sustains fruitful ministry" and to "the source of that fruitfulness, the love of God in Christ." When we Christians do this, we are less likely to succumb to the unclean spirits that clamor to possess us.

Richard, for example, was placed in a parish where the founding former pastor had been involved in misconduct. Richard's job is to win back the trust of the parishioners, which he is doing through his patience and integrity. In this difficult setting, he practices good habits to sustain his energy for ministry. He takes Wednesdays off, takes a vacation each year, eats three well-balanced meals a day, exercises regularly and gets eight hours of sleep. "He nurtures a playful sense of humor and reads the comics in the newspaper every morning," adds Hopkins. These habits help an ordinary person become a pastor of "well-differentiated integrity and enduring impact." Even more important, Richard makes room for a loving spirit that he feels is always there for him, ready to extend inspiration and mercy.

Ironically, even though Jesus' followers aren't always sure who he is, the unclean spirit in Mark recognizes Jesus immediately. The unclean spirit is equally sure of the authority Jesus carries—it knows that Jesus can cast him out of the body he so violently possesses. Sometimes we are unable to recognize the demons that grip us so tightly. Sometimes we are unable to accept Jesus' authority as completely as we would like. At these times, we must fill our plates with the fruits of the spirit.