

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – February 7, 2021 – Black History Month  
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

**Demons**, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister, Old South Church in Boston  
Based on Mark 1.32-39

Demons. They are there in the New Testament. What's more, in the Gospels, the demons know Jesus. Jesus faces them down. Silences them. Casts them out. What's more, Jesus charges his followers to do the same. Demons.

There is a whole field of study called demonology. It's complicated and byzantine. The study of demonology can take a hapless person down treacherous and serpentine rabbit holes from which they might not find their way back to the light of day. As the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Dominican friar and bishop, Albertus Magnus said of demonology: "It is taught by the demons, it teaches about the demons, and it leads to the demons".

I have no intention of going there, or taking you there, so let me cut to the chase: demons in the New Testament represent evil, immorality, wickedness, suffering, mayhem, confusion, and rebellion against God. In a pre-scientific world – in the New Testament world of 2000 years ago – demons are a shorthand for evil. The thing about evil: it causes harm, injury.

Evil. In the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith we proclaim this: "God calls us into the church ... to proclaim the gospel ... and resist the powers of evil..." The pairing of these two acts – proclaiming the gospel and resisting evil – comes from today's scripture. Quoting Mark 1.39 "Jesus proclaimed the message ... and cast out demons."

The UCC Statement of Faith was commissioned in 1957 and adopted by the UCC's General Synod in 1959. Which is to say, it was drafted and adopted in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and in the wake of Nazism, a racist, nationalist movement in Germany that had been aided and abetted – and not much resisted – by Christian churches ... just as slavery and segregation has been aided and abetted – and, not much resisted – by US Christianity.

One of the theologians engaged in the drafting of the UCC Statement of Faith reports that it was very much informed by the world in which the church was then ministering. Roger Shinn wrote: "Proclaiming the gospel and resisting evil are joined in the Statement of Faith because Jesus joined them: he sent his followers to proclaim the gospel and to cast out demons. The telling of the Gospel inevitably means conflict with the demonic forces." This theologian avers that the evil to which the UCC Statement of Faith refers, absolutely includes, though is not limited to, the evils of racism and white nationalism. Racism was on the minds and in the hearts of the authors of our Statement of Faith. (Roger L. Shinn, *Confessing our Faith*, pp 91-92)

When penning such phrases in the UCC Statement of Faith as "resist the powers of evil," as "the cost and joy of Christian discipleship", Roger Shinn, then a Christian ethicist and dean of Union Theological Seminary in NYC, was absolutely thinking of the courage of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

whose Christian resistance to Nazism cost him, cost him dearly, cost him his life. For his resistance to the evil of white nationalism, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Nazi regime, then in April of 1945, hanged.

Today, on this day, the first Sunday in Black History Month, allow me to tell some true stories and to ask you to ask yourself: Who is proclaiming Christ's message of love in each story? Who is responsible for the evil and suffering in this story? Where are the demons?

The First Story.

The year is 1764. Nim, an enslaved man living in Litchfield, CT conducts his own singular protest, sitting where he is not supposed to.

Nim attends the Congregational Church in Litchfield. Repeatedly he chooses to sit in a gallery pew reserved for white people (a pew reserved for whites, not by any signage, but by custom, by practice, by convention). Disturbed by his breach of custom – distressed by this man of African descent who does not know his place – several white men complain to Nim's "owner", Colonial Ebenezer Marsh. Nim's behaviors are described as 'very insolent', and 'irregular and indecent conduct'.

Marsh orders Nim to desist; to sit in the section reserved for people of African descent. In addition, a lock is placed on the door to the pew. The next Sunday morning, June 8, 1764, Nim arrives early, before the service has begun. He climbs the stairs to the gallery, walks to the forbidden pew, breaks the lock on the door, enters and sits down.

Court testimonies do not agree on what transpires next, but it is clear that Nim is confronted by three young, white men who forcibly remove him. In one account, Nim is thrown from the pew. The incident is adjudicated two months later, in August 1764, and the three young, white men are fined a nominal three shillings each, plus court costs. I so wish the story ended there. Instead, two years later, in 1766, the Superior Court reverses and voids the earlier conviction.

I ask you: Who in this story proclaimed the gospel. Who resisted evil? Who were the demons? Where in all this was the minister ... where were the deacons and where were all the rest of the Christians?

The Second Story.

The year is 1740. The place: Boston. Perhaps involving members of this church? I don't know. Of an evening, an enslaved man is ordered to entertain the whites in attendance at his master's house by impersonating the Rev George Whitefield (the Great Awakening preacher). One can imagine that this enslaved man is an excellent and entertaining impersonator. Obliging (for what choice does he have?) the Black man who is to impersonate Rev Whitefield, opens with a prayer and then launches into an impromptu sermon...though a sermon, one must surmise, that had been brewing in this man's heart and mind for some time.

In his sermon he claims, "I know I have a Master, even Jesus Christ my Savior, who has said that a man cannot serve two masters. Therefore, I claim Jesus Christ to be my rightful master. You know, Master (now addressing his earthly master): you have been given to cursing and swearing and blaspheming God's Holy Name; you have been given to be drunken, a whoremonger, covetous, a liar, a cheat. But God has pronounced a woe against all such, and has said that such shall never enter the kingdom of God."

I ask you: who in this story is proclaiming the gospel. Who is resisting evil? Where are the demons?

(Foot note: this incident was subsequently printed in a newspaper in Glasgow, Scotland, The Glasgow Weekly-History in a story reporting on the success of Christian revivalism on this soil. In other words, this enslaved man's sermon, impersonating the revivalist preacher, George Whitefield, had its effect. The white master was there and then, under the spell of the impersonating sermon, reformed!)

Somebody say, Hallelujah!

I recently finished this book, *Dividing the Faith: the Rise of Segregated Churches in the Early American North*, by Richard J. Boles, a professor of history, at Oklahoma State University. In doing research for this book Boles spent a lot of time in Boston, at the Congregational Library ... I dare say he knows our church's records better than any of us. Old South features prominently in this book...not always to our advantage.

By carefully tracing church records – records of membership, baptisms, weddings, deaths and funerals – Boles argues that in the colonial period, churches such as Old South, while interracial, were very much segregated. Black and white worshipped at the same hour, in the same building, listening to the same sermon, but very much separate and unequal. Blacks in the balconies with the children. Whites on the main floor, with the most prominent and respected of white people sitting closest to the pulpit.

However, in the antebellum period, as the country neared the Civil War, as persons of African descent grew more and more educated, as more and more gained freedom, as they were able to gain in agency, with income and land... you might think (you'd be wrong to think), you might think that our churches became more and more integrated. In actual fact, while white Christians, proclaimed equality as a gift from God, they practiced manifest, harmful, injurious inequality. They were called out for this by Black and Native American Christians, some of them clergy, who argued it was the white Americans who needed to convert to Christianity and to become civilized. Indeed, it was this failure to honor God's equality, to meaningfully integrate, that gave rise in the early 1800 to separate Black churches, such as Boston's African Meeting House.

I ask you: who in this period is proclaiming the gospel? Who is resisting evil? Who are the demons?

The UCC Statement of Faith avers that we are called to live out the love and justice of Jesus by engaging and resisting evil. Proclaiming the gospel is not, on its own, good enough, faithful enough. It is to be paired with more perilous and meaningful work: the holy work of resisting evil.

#### UCC STATEMENT OF FAITH

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit,  
God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God,  
and to your deeds we testify:  
You call the worlds into being,  
create persons in your own image,  
and set before each one the ways of life and death.  
You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.  
You judge people and nations by your righteous will  
declared through prophets and apostles.  
In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior,  
you have come to us  
and shared our common lot,  
conquering sin and death  
and reconciling the world to yourself.  
You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,  
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,  
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.  
You call us into your church  
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be your servants in the service of others,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil,  
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,  
to join him in his passion and victory.  
You promise to all who trust you  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
your presence in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.  
Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.  
Amen.

#### BENEDICTION

May the God who shakes heaven and earth, whom death could not contain, who lives to disturb and heal us, bless you with the power to go forth, proclaiming the gospel and resisting