

November 8

Lesson 10

Worship in the Synagogue

Focal Passage: Luke 4:31-44

Background Text: Same

Purpose Statement: To recognize the supportive relationship among worship, resistance to evil, and healing

Luke 4:31-44

³¹Jesus went down to the city of Capernaum in Galilee and taught the people each Sabbath. ³²They were amazed by his teaching because he delivered his message with authority.

³³A man in the synagogue had the spirit of an unclean demon. He screamed, ³⁴"Hey! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God."

³⁵"Silence!" Jesus said, speaking harshly to the demon. "Come out of him!" The demon threw the man down before them, then came out of him without harming him.

³⁶They were all shaken and said to each other, "What kind of word is this, that he can command unclean spirits with authority and power, and they leave?" ³⁷Reports about him spread everywhere in the surrounding region.

³⁸After leaving the synagogue, Jesus went home with Simon. Simon's mother-in-law was sick with a high fever, and the family asked Jesus to help her. ³⁹He bent over her and spoke harshly to the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and served them.

⁴⁰When the sun was setting, everyone brought to Jesus relatives and acquaintances with all kinds of diseases. Placing his hands on each of them, he healed them. ⁴¹

Demons also came out of many people. They screamed, "You are God's Son." But he spoke harshly to them and wouldn't allow them to speak because they recognized that he was the Christ. ⁴²When daybreak arrived, Jesus went to a deserted place. The crowds were looking for him. When they found him, they tried to keep him from leaving them. ⁴³But he said to them, "I must preach the good news of God's kingdom in other cities too, for this is why I was sent." ⁴⁴So he continued preaching in the Judean synagogues.

Key Verses: "But [Jesus] said to them, 'I must preach the good news of God's kingdom in other cities too, for this is why I was sent.' So he continued preaching in the Judean synagogues" (Luke 4:43-44).

As is typical for confirmation classes, as a pastor, I usually took the youth to a synagogue to teach them about the Jewish faith. In one church I served, I took a group of youth to a synagogue, and the congregation welcomed us warmly. The boys in our group put coverings on their heads. They saw the Scriptures in Hebrew and Aramaic. They attended a service. A kind young woman served as our host.

As part of this experience, I asked the youth, "Do you and your brothers and sisters agree on everything?" One young woman volunteered quickly, "My brother and I agree on nothing!"

I pointed out that members of the Jewish faith are our brothers and sisters. We do not agree on the identity of Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus is God's Son and part of the Trinity. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Our Jewish brothers and sisters do not agree with these teachings of the church. They think that the Messiah has not come yet, in part, because they do not see the dramatic changes they believe should accompany the arrival of the Messiah. Nevertheless, we join with members of the Jewish faith to try to make the world a better place.

I read to them from Micah 4:1-4, which says that, someday, God will bring all people together, and we will have peace. We share the heritage of the Old Testament (the *Tanakh* for members of the Jewish faith). This lesson teaches us about the Jewish roots of our worship. As a faithful Jew, Jesus went into the synagogues to preach, teach, heal, and fight evil.

What Do We Make of Demons?

We never know what might happen in a worship service. We have all probably attended worship

where everything seemed to go wrong and the service fell flat. Sometimes we attend worship with relatively low expectations, only to experience God in a dramatic way, even a life-changing way. Let us hope that worship remains unpredictable.

In Luke 4, we read about back-to-back worship services Jesus attended. In one service, he barely escaped with his life (Luke 4:16-30). In the service described in verses 31-37, Jesus scored a major defeat against evil, which led to healings that demonstrated the message that Jesus is God's Son (Luke 3:22). In the aftermath of that worship service, the people wanted Jesus to stay and "tried to keep him from leaving them" (Luke 4:42).

In the 1950s, when one of my college professors was a college student/pastor, he gained a reputation for his sermons on racial justice. One day, a cohort of the KKK entered the sanctuary to attempt to intimidate him. He stood his ground and continued his sermon in the face of a hostile challenge.

I have occasionally had people interrupt worship services, sometimes to confront me, but I have never had the experience Jesus had in Luke 4:33, when a man who "had the spirit of an unclean demon" confronted him, screaming.

In my experience as a pastor, I discovered that most people don't know what to do with the language of demons, unclean spirits, powers, and similar phenomena in the New Testament. Language about the demonic appears throughout the New Testament (for example, Ephesians 6:12).

We may not all agree on how to understand this language. Some contemporary Christians dismiss this talk as pre-scientific superstition. Other Christians seem to take the language so concretely that they still conduct exorcisms, even for everyday illnesses. A middle ground might come in the understanding that we should take the language of the demonic seriously as a description of the evil in creation beyond human sinfulness.

At a minimum, while I do take the language of the demonic seriously, I can say that the language of the demonic speaks to the tenacity of evil. The reason we pray for the sick and for God's help with problems big and small is that we understand a spiritual dimension to the evil and suffering of the world. We do not have to consider every illness as demonic to understand that we can talk about a spiritual dimension to evil and suffering.

How do you understand and explain instances of demons and unclean spirits in New Testament accounts?

Challenging the Power of Evil

In this encounter, the spirit of the unclean demon brought the fight to Jesus. Within Luke's narrative, this particular entity is the "spokedemon" for all of the spiritual forces that oppose Jesus' ministry. The demonic forces battle Jesus more than once within the Gospel of Luke. The devil sought to stop Jesus at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:1-13).

Upon the return of the 72 after Jesus had sent them out, Jesus told them that, because of their efforts, he "saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (10:18). The demon who confronted Jesus in the synagogue used what we might call "trash talk" when he told Jesus, "I know who you are" (4:34).

In the biblical worldview, to know the identity of a supernatural being gave one power over that being. Jesus effortlessly cast the demon out of the man. "Silence!" Jesus said, speaking harshly to the demon. "Come out of him!" The demon threw the man down before them, then came out of him without harming him" (verse 35).

Whatever our understanding of the language and narratives about the demonic in the New Testament, we can perhaps agree that this encounter shows that part of the purpose of worship is to push back against the evil in God's creation. Every act of worship becomes a challenge to the power of evil, however we understand it. Every act of worship challenges racism, misogyny, greed, violence, exploitation, oppression, apathy, and a host of other examples of the demonic in our world. We worship, not just to gain a warm feeling, but to battle against the unclean spirits.

When have you experienced worship that directly challenged the power of evil?

Power and Authority

The reaction of the crowd demonstrates the connection between worship and the exorcism. In Mark's account of this encounter, the crowd responded, "What is this? A new teaching with authority!" (Mark 1:27). In Luke's account, the crowd responded, "What kind of word is this, that he can command unclean spirits with authority and power, and they leave?" (Luke 4:36). Jesus' teachings and his action to battle evil go together.

In the next scene, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law (verses 38-39). To this point in the narrative, Jesus had not healed anyone. Nevertheless, the family seemed to understand that the teacher and exorcist could heal. The element of the fever as demonic comes out more strongly in Luke's account than in Mark's, where Jesus simply took the woman's hand and lifted her up (Mark 1:31). In Luke, Jesus "spoke harshly to the fever" (4:39).

Without claiming that every fever derives from a demon, we can affirm that illness is part of the creation that God does not intend. Some theologians have joked that Jesus healed the woman just

in time for dinner! She arose from her sickbed and served those in her house. The message of the passage conveys the immediacy of the healing, which did not leave her weak. Her service models discipleship as a response to Jesus' healing.

In what situations have you experienced healing because of a worship service? How did you experience the healing? Where do you see evidence of Jesus' healing power and authority today?

Healing and Challenge

Following the healing, people from all over town brought friends and family for Jesus to heal. The scene conveys the extent of the need and Jesus' power to respond. The scene draws the connection between healing and exorcism. Part of the message of the healing stories in the New Testament comes in the affirmation that Jesus' ministry revealed the healing that awaits us in the resurrection.

In the resurrection, the power of evil will finally be vanquished. This narrative from Luke teaches us that part of the purpose of worship is to celebrate God's victory over evil and to anticipate the healing of the resurrection. Each worship service sets up a battle line between the power manifested in Jesus and the forces of evil. All of the church's efforts to fight the corruption and evil of the world participate in this fight against the demonic forces, however we understand them.

In stark contrast to Jesus' experience in Nazareth, the people in Capernaum wanted Jesus to stay in their town. The two services emphasize different aspects of worship. Worship offers us healing and frees us from the power of evil. Worship also confronts us with God's radical love, offered even to the foreigner (Luke 4:25-28). Jesus' message heals as well as challenges. In a sense, the people of Capernaum wanted Jesus all to themselves, but Jesus understood his call to spread the message in other places. For Jesus to stay in Capernaum would limit his ministry.

In what situations have you felt challenged by a worship service? In what way did the service challenge you? How did you respond to the challenge? How does the language of the demonic in the New Testament help you understand the purpose of worship?

Affirming Our Roots

The title of this lesson, "Worship in the Synagogue," points to the Jewish roots of our Christian

worship. The practice of teaching in the synagogues, as Jesus did in the passage, served as a model for Christian preaching.

We Christians owe much to our Jewish ancestors for our understanding of God, of grace and forgiveness, and in our understanding of worship. We learn praise from the Psalms. We learn about God's call for justice from the prophets. We learn about God's promises for the future from Isaiah 11 and 65.

Even though we must recognize our theological disagreements with members of the Jewish faith, we join hands with them in worship of God and for fighting the evil of the world. They do not participate in our sacraments, but we offer praise together to God.

In our passage, as part of the worship service, Jesus won a decisive victory over evil. The service led to a time of healing. Worship resists the power of evil and offers healing.

I belong to an organization called Faith Forward Dallas, which brings together Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, and representatives of other faiths to work on problems in our community. We fight hunger and poverty side by side.

A wonderful woman named Almas, a practitioner of Islam, has often helped the church I attend with its ministry to unsheltered persons and to sojourners from Latin America. We respect each other's beliefs; we learn from each other; we engage in serious dialogue. Many of the members attend services at the houses of worship of other members for special events. The rabbis and imams often offer prayer for tragedies that strike Christian communities, such as the bombing in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday 2019.

One of the events that Faith Forward Dallas sponsored was a prayer vigil in response to gun violence. A few of us gathered early in the morning under a tent that barely protected us from the rain, to pray about gun violence. As you may know, gun violence has been a significant problem in the state of Texas and in the city of Dallas. Pastor Rachel, a leader for Faith Forward Dallas and pastor of the church I attend, asked me to offer one of the prayers that morning. I was honored to lead the children of Abraham--Jews, Muslims, and Christians--in prayer. Many people stayed for hours in a time of worship.

The prayer vigil exemplified the message of our passage that worship includes confronting evil. A handful of people huddling under a leaky tent might have seemed insignificant against the horror of gun violence, but we who gathered believe in the power of prayer.

We will never know whether even one person was spared the pain of a bullet because of our prayers, but we believe that praying together makes a difference. Against the hatred, hunger for power, anger, fear, and cruelty that leads to gun violence, we offered our prayers. For the ways we have used the intellect God gave us to make weapons of destruction, we offered our prayers. For the

healing of those injured by guns and for the grief of the family members of gun violence, we offered our prayers. We did not believe that prayer substituted for our action, but we believed that prayer became a spiritual force for good in the face of great evil.

In what kinds of situations have you participated in a prayer vigil? How did you understand the effect your prayers might have?

Holy God, we thank you that you have all power and authority. We thank you that you can heal. We are humbled by the fact that you want to use us to resist evil and work for good, and we ask for your help in doing just that. Show us how to worship you in a way that results in our decisive actions to bring healing to our world; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.