

The Intersection of Hope and Power
Mark 1:21-28
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One of the requirements for ordination in the United Church of Christ is to complete at least one unit of chaplaincy training, usually in a hospital setting. I did my training at the Eleanor Slater Hospital in Cranston, Rhode Island. Because of some terrible miscommunication during my interview, I was absolutely unaware that the Slater is, in fact, the state psychiatric hospital, on the grounds of the state prison, and I would be working in locked wards, serving involuntarily committed, psychotic patients. I was shocked to learn this, and I was in way over my head.

Yet every day for ten weeks, I dutifully made the hour-long drive from our home south of Boston to Providence and then to Cranston to show up. To do my best. I took back roads as much as possible, to avoid the unbearable traffic on I-195. I drove Route 44 to East Providence, across the Seekonk River at the Henderson Bridge, into the area around Brown University, and then through the crowded city streets.

My very favorite part of that trip was the area around Brown University, with its grand old homes and stately, arching trees. It is just a lovely area, the only beauty in my otherwise grim day. I particularly liked the street names in that area. After I crossed the Seekonk River, I found myself on Angell St. Then at the museum, I turned left onto Hope. I liked that. In the middle of that stress-filled summer, it always made me smile to start my day by turning left onto Hope.

Halfway down Hope St., I crossed Benevolent St. Then I came to a four-way stop at Power. It was the beginning of the retail section near Brown University, full of coffee shops, trendy boutiques, and funky little stores that sell New Age crystals and lottery tickets. At this intersection, the big, beautiful houses were just behind me. Ahead on the left was a tiny shop. Ahead on the right was a nice older home – not a mansion like the ones I had just passed, but a home of the size I might dream of owning someday. It was a two-story Colonial, sitting right at the sidewalk – a tall, narrow house, with one small, beautiful, stained-glass window near the front door. This house was old enough to have some architectural quirks, which I would love and Dave would hate. Truth be told, it was probably drafty inside and the plumbing was surely a pain, but that didn't matter to me. The real reason I fantasized about buying that house was not the house itself, but the address. I wanted to live at the intersection of Hope and Power.

The intersection of Hope and Power.

That was what I needed that summer – I needed to be able to hope – that I would make it through my training, that I would not be injured, that I would somehow learn to serve people who are truly suffering from mental illness, that I would not fall flat on my face and get bounced from the ordination process. I needed hope, and I didn't have much of it.

I also needed power, God's power, to make it through that summer. It certainly was not in my own power to succeed. I was so totally out of my depth. I needed the power of God to meet my human hope, or I would certainly flounder.

I imagine that the families of my patients, those who loved them and watched them sinking further and further into illness, had the same need I did. They needed hope. And they needed the power of God to

intervene, to make things right. Certainly, the patients themselves felt hopeless to control their own illnesses. They needed a reason to hope, and they needed the grace and power of God.

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So, when I read today's scripture, about Jesus' healing the man with the unclean spirit, I am transported back to that summer and to the people I worked with, the people whose chaotic stories I received in noisy locked wards. The people of Jesus' day knew nothing of the illness that made their friend, their brother, their son cry out incomprehensible things. Today, we might be able to name his condition, but I can promise you that it would still seem just as strange to us as it did to them. And what we can't understand, we label as foreign, or strange, or unclean. Yet this man was a child of God, desperately in need of hope, and desperately in need of the power of God to make that hope a reality.

And into this moment of urgent need comes Jesus, responding to the man's deepest, most secret hope, the hope he dare not name, the hope that one day he might be free of his illness. Jesus speaks with the authority, with the power of God Almighty, to make that hope a reality, to bring healing where no human could heal, to make things right where no human could succeed. And the man was healed.

There are plenty of things in our own lives that we can't understand and can't control, things that might even seem evil or unclean to us, things that seem to have a power over us or over ones we love. I've got my list. I'm sure you've got your own. Two thousand years from now, these things might seem simple and fixable, but for us they are insurmountable. The Gospel of Mark tells us that whenever our world and God's world intersect, we can see that the things that have so much power over us are insignificant next to the power of God, and situations that seem hopeless are instead filled with hope that only God's grace can give.

Fifteen years ago, I drove to Providence every day for hospital chaplaincy training. For ten weeks, I worked at the state psychiatric hospital, work I am not cut out for. The training is required for ordination, so I couldn't get out of it, and I couldn't put it off to another time. For those ten weeks, I felt trapped.

But every morning, I smiled as I drove down Angell St. and turned left onto Hope, and I fantasized about buying a beautiful old house, not because I needed a home in Providence but because I wanted to lay claim to that address. I wanted to be able to say – even that summer – that I lived at the intersection of Hope and Power.

Today's gospel text, this strange story of demonic possession and exorcism, is a gift to us, because it is like a spiritual deed to that house. As Christians, we all live by God's grace at the intersection of Hope and Power every day of our lives. Every day!

And I say, thanks be to God.