

I have recently become completely obsessed with Louise Penny's murder mysteries. I am not kidding: I have been binge reading them – to the point that I finished one of the books at 2:30 in the morning because I had to know whodunit. Thankfully, the next day was Friday, which is my day off, but I can't remember when I actually last stayed up that late reading.

To be honest, though, it isn't just the plot of the novels that I find compelling, it is the characters. I am a huge fan of Chief Inspector Armand Gamache – if you want to know what my idea of good leadership is, he's pretty close to the model of it. He's steady, he doesn't have to be the loudest voice in the room, he is non-judgmental, he is willing to play a long game to get the outcome he's seeking. The author said in an interview that she conceived of the character in the midst of the hurt and brokenness of the weeks following 9/11, and she wanted to create a character who *could* be someone she would admire.¹

The other thing about the chief inspector that I particularly like is his pattern of compassion and sensitivity toward people who don't always deserve it. This policeman who could so easily become embittered by being a homicide detective is impossibly kind, preternaturally patient, and respectful of people who don't behave respectfully toward him.

I admire him; I'm not sure I'm capable of *being* him.

But as the plots of these novels progress, the characters involved become increasingly more wounded. Some wounds are purely accidental, some are malicious, some are self-

¹ www.louispenny.com

inflicted, but each of the characters in turn experiences some loss or damage or need for healing.

Despite being set in an idyllic Canadian village and relying on sometimes campy banter, there is an authenticity of experience that makes the characters and their struggles seem at times painfully real and familiar.

To live a human lifetime is to be faced with the extremes of joy and sadness, health and infirmity, dependence and self-reliance. Into all of our lives each of these fall in some measure, if we are honest with ourselves.

It is because of this reality of things falling into our lives that one line of our Gospel lesson today jumped out to me – I have missed it many times before as I have read this passage – the whole city was gathered around the door.

Maybe they were just interested and intrigued – like Paul’s audience in Greece that would be happy to debate endlessly with him the nature of God. Or maybe they were spiritual but uninterested in any concrete foundation. Or perhaps they were simply voyeuristic. But what if it was more? What if they too needed healing?

This passage seems to demand our attention with its larger than life themes of healing and exorcism – who wouldn’t after all, be caught up in the experience of exorcism?

Pretty much once you’ve said the words, “Casting out demons,” most other phrases are going to be lost.

Jesus, after all, is in the house with friends and is engaged such activities as casting out demons, and it is natural that our attention would fix on that – it is odd. It’s not the normal pattern. It stands out.

Most of us are probably a little bit weirded-out by the idea of demons – and so we have developed a practice in the church, at least the preachers have, in order to make these passages of scripture where Jesus engages in such odd behavior a little bit more understandable – here’s what we do: we name the demons.

Nowhere does Mark assign names to the demons that Jesus is casting out –Mark does not appear in any way nonplussed at the presence of demons or the need of Jesus to cast them out and so he doesn’t give them any names.

They’re just demons. That is what we know about them from the Gospel.

But we name them to make them a little bit easier to understand. They’re not named Beelzebub or Belial or Lucifer or Screwtape or Wormwood – well, most of us don’t at least.

Most of us name them things like spousal abuse. That’s a demon, right?

Or maybe one is named bigotry – that’s a name that captures a lot of demons, right?

Or maybe still others are named addiction – booze, drugs, sex – that can be a big demon too.

Or maybe the demon is named hunger, or not being able to pay the rent, or inertia.

You see, when we name the demons they shift from the realm of phantasmagoria to real life. They become the experiences and indeed even the wounds that define the manner of life.

Please know that I am not suggesting that life is terrible or that pain is the order of being.

I’m just acknowledging that hurts are real and diseases linger.

And Mark, who gives the demons no names, tells us that the whole city was gathered around the door.

Isn't that interesting – the whole city.

Mark is not known for wasting words. He's a sparse writer – his style is one of brevity and if he includes a detail, he means us to make note of it.

And he tells us the whole city is gathered around the door.

Is it prurient curiosity that draws them there?

Perhaps.

But again, Mark doesn't waste words. He tells us that the people came for healing. They came to have demons cast out. One sentence leads to the next, and we read that the whole city was gathered around the door.

That's quite an image, isn't it?

What if our whole city gathered around the door of a house where healing was needed to see what would happen? Can you imagine that?

What a fascinating thought that the whole city could become so enthralled by the possibility of wholeness that we would wait breathlessly for words to be whispered out the door that healing has come.

But perhaps there is more.

Perhaps the whole city waits by the door because the whole city needs healing.

Many years back, I served on a Presbytery committee where we had the task of determining whether pastoral nominees and congregations were well-matched. The call in a Presbyterian church is always a three-way call – between the church, the clergy and the presbytery, and so I found myself on this committee that was interviewing a clergywoman from another denomination who had received a call to serve a Presbyterian congregation – she had been trained in a Pentecostal denomination, so we knew her style

might be a bit different from most of ours, but her credentials were impeccable. She had a doctoral degree in counseling, we'd heard her preaching and it was wonderful. She was endearing and engaging as we talked to her – and the committee began to be perplexed by the mystery as to why she was being called to this particular congregation because they had a reputation for being frightfully bad to clergy. Moreover, they were fiscally troubled, their session seemed incapable of self-policing against a terrible bully in the congregation's midst and they were deeply resistant to guidance in solving these problems.

So we were meeting with this wonderfully gifted Pentecostal minister who felt a deep call to change her denominational loyalties and come to this congregation and for some reason we felt a need to make sure she understood what she was getting herself into.

The chair of the committee said, "You've reviewed their finances, I assume."

"Yes," she replied, "I understand them."

"They have shared with you about their past history with clergy," another member quizzed.

"Yes," she replied, "They were upfront with me about their troubles."

On and on it went, with each member of the committee airing one problem or another that this congregation had experienced, all in the ostensible effort to make sure she knew and finally, she exploded.

"Yes, this church has problems," she said. "I know all about them. But what makes you think your churches ain't got problems too!?"

She went on, "Maybe you've got so much money you've forgotten how to be responsible to God for all you've been given. Maybe your sessions run so smoothly that you've

forgotten what its like to have a member who has no other place where people think she's important enough to listen to. And maybe your expectations of deference from your congregation are so self-aggrandized that they obscure the fact that Jesus called you all there to serve. What makes you so sure your congregations ain't got problems too?"

Her call was approved.

Mark says the whole city gathered outside the door.

I wonder sometimes if we're always a hundred percent honest with ourselves about what the demons' names are?

It seems to me that the whole city was gathered around the door because the whole city needed healing.

I could catalogue the ailments of our city that need healing – so could you.

I could name the demons that need exorcism – so could you.

Together, our lists would probably include such names as hunger and homelessness, sex-trafficking and drug violence. We might include bullying and demeaning treatment of undocumented workers – we might mention a political system that seems to ignore the voices of those trying to name names like these we have listed that leads to embittered constituencies and breeds cynicism.

Or, we could acknowledge all our need for healing.

Or, like the Pentecostal preacher said, "What makes you think your family ain't got problems?"

We do all need healing.

Healing involves needing grace.

Grace, of course, is nothing more complex than God's love – unconditional, unmerited and unearned – as I hope you all know.

That sounds like almost nothing – and yet it is everything.

God wants you and me to be well. God wants you and me to live without demons gnawing away at us with abandon, whether those demons have been named or not.

God wants us to be whole – the way God created us to be – to be freed to live into the fullness of what God has called us to do and be.

That's true of cities.

That's true of congregations.

That is true of people.

That is true of you.

And that is true of me.

Sometimes the grace of God takes the form of a healer – one schooled in therapy or medicine.

Sometimes the grace of God takes the form of a teacher – one enabled to correct hurtful patterns and replace misinformation with knowledge.

Sometimes the grace of God takes the form of a parent – one who has sought healing in their own life in order to be able to provide healing to others.

And sometimes the grace of God is even a preacher who tells you that God loves you.

Sometimes the grace of God is a friend who tells you that you are forgiven.

And sometimes you are the grace of God.

Did you notice that, once healed, the woman, whom Mark also does not name, proceeds to do what she had always done. She proceeds to live her life. She proceeds to do those things to which she was called.

Yes, the whole city was gathered there around the door. Perhaps we are too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.