

## ***"An Authority to Send Those Demons Packing!"***

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 4  
5:30 p.m. Saturday, January 28, 2012  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In some ways, we all come here this evening with our demons. Let me explain. In this building we have racks for our coats, an umbrella stand, trashcans for the empty coffee cup or used Kleenex. But not all things can be left at the door, can they? Try as we might, we cannot shake off the bad mood we were in earlier today. The troubles that kept us awake last night were still with us when we got in the car to come here a little while ago. We bear burdens—some of us heavy burdens—and we attempt, with varying degrees of success, to shoulder them even as we pick up the hymnal and give praise to God. Some of us are hurting right this very moment, and it would not take much to reduce us to tears. Some of us are anxious about events yet to come, about tomorrow and the day after that, and what each of those days might bring. Some of us feel the pull of our past, the pain of years ago remaining fresh in our minds. None of us comes into this worship space a blank slate. Sometimes we come empty, yes, waiting to be filled, but always we come bearing the wounds of daily living. And sometimes we believe that nothing short of a miracle could change our situation. We balance precariously between being the skeptic who thinks the miracle will not come and the hopeful one who holds our breath waiting for it.

And if all that is true, then surely we are much like that demon-possessed man in the synagogue who, Mark says, has an unclean spirit. It's easy to read this lesson and think we have nothing in common with this man. But the truth is the exact opposite, isn't it? He's entering that worship space haunted by something that can't be left at the door. He bears the wounds of daily living. He needs a miracle. But was he a skeptic or a hopeful one that day?

Had Jesus of Nazareth not walked into the synagogue that day, the man with the unclean spirit would have remained in his same pitiable state. There was no one else in that worship space with the authority or power to change this man's life. Oh, there were leaders in the synagogue. Always there were people who could quote scripture right and left, or who had memorized the Law of Moses. Certainly there were scribes present whose responsibility it was to record scripture and the mounds of rabbinical interpretation that followed. But that didn't mean they had authority.

It turns out only Jesus, the Holy One of God, has the authority over the demons—even ours. Of all the people in that synagogue, it was Jesus who helped the troubled man. Jesus spoke a word of authority and the demons fled.

I just said that Jesus even has authority over our demons. Except that sometimes we get in Jesus' way. For as much as we can be channels of his great love and mercy, we can just as often be barriers. We can put up barriers to Jesus' liberating power in people's lives, including our own. We can be like those scribes, who know an awful lot of stuff, but cannot and will not use that knowledge to minister to others.

That's what Paul's referring to in our lesson from his first letter to the Corinthians. Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians they must either be Jesus' channels of love and mercy, or move out of the way and let Jesus do his stuff. They must not be barriers that prevent the authority of our Lord from transforming people's lives.

Paul's discussion centers around what was a very practical matter for 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians, but one we might have trouble relating to: What to do with meat that originally was offered as sacrifice to false gods at various temples in the Roman Empire? Those Christians more knowledgeable about these things, and secure and mature in their faith, saw no problem buying that sacrificed meat once it got to the marketplace. Sure, it had been offered to some Greek or Roman goddess, but those smart Christians knew the god or goddess had no power over them, and they didn't worship that false god. It made complete sense for them to think to themselves, "It's OK to eat this meat. It's just meat."

The issue here is that while it wasn't wrong to eat the sacrificed meat, sometimes there is more to consider than "being right." Other Christians, particularly new Christians—most particularly those who previously worshiped those Roman and Greek gods—might be very confused by such actions. They would be uncomfortable purchasing the meat in the marketplace, much less consuming it. For when they were baptized, they renounced their old ways. (You know how, when we have a baptism here in worship, we also renounce those things which might draw us away from God?) Well, these new Christians had repented of their previous life as pagans and the pagan rituals in which they participated. They were striving to live the new life Christ gave them. So, Paul asks a legitimate question: If eating the meat causes a brother or sister harm, weakens their faith in any way, is eating the meat worth the cost? No, Paul says.

In this case, as in many other situations, having knowledge might puff us up in pride, but love always builds up, and that is the better path to take. Being "right" and knowing the correct answer is less important than seeking God's good will for all.

You know what I think? I think it takes wisdom and discernment to do the loving thing that builds up our sisters and brothers. And wisdom and discernment are really a different thing from "knowledge."

Tex Sample, a writer and professor of religion, recalls the time in his classroom when he made fun of an old church hymn. The hymn was "In the Garden," a song some of you may know from years back. Tex didn't like the hymn much, and made it his personal mission to deconstruct it for his students. He told them it was too sentimental, too saccharine-sweet, too individualistic, and the theology was wrong. Tex, with all his knowledge, rendered his judgment on the hymn, and then he proceeded to sing it, making fun of it all along the way. The class ended. All the students left but one—a 35-year-old woman who came up to this professor and said, "My daddy started molesting me when I was 11, and he continued till I was 16 when, somehow, I found a way to stop it. After every one of those horrible ordeals, I'd go outside and I'd sing that song. 'I come to the garden along while the dew is still on the roses; and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses. And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own; and the joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known.'"

She continued, "If it had not been for that song, I don't know how I would have made it through those five horrible years." Then she took an index finger, pointed at the professor, and said, "Don't you ever, ever, ever make fun of that song in my presence again!"

That song, individualistic and sentimental as it was, unappreciated by a professor of religion, helped this woman survive, for as she sang it, God's love was real for her, and the demons fled from His presence.

Most of us come here not wanting knowledge per se, but wanting to know Jesus. We want to be in the presence of the Holy One of God who has ultimate authority. We enter this worship space with so much baggage, with the wounds of daily living, and we yearn for the love of Jesus Christ, who was wounded for us. Jesus has the power to rid us of our demons, bear every burden we bring here, and then give us strength and hope for tomorrow. He freed that man in the synagogue. He sustained that young girl in her garden. He does the same for you and me.

**AMEN.**

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