

Sermon
13 Pentecost—Proper 16-B-2
St. Andrew's, Methuen
August 22, 2021
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Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18
Psalm 34:15-22
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

Jesus asks the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Did you see the 1973 movie "The Exorcist"? It was nominated for 10 Academy Awards, winning 2. It was rated R in depicting a possessed 12-year-old girl. I don't like horror movies, but as a senior in college I was thinking about going to seminary, so my two trailer mates and I drove from Athens to Atlanta to see it: [While standing in the long line to get in, two Georgia Tech students came out of the theatre dragging between them their buddy who was pretending to have passed out from fear.]

I was touched by the movie and especially by its two Roman Catholic priests: the brooding young priest/psychiatrist beset by doubts, and the faithful older priest/archeologist, the exorcist, approved by the bishop.

Near the end of the exorcism, after the older priest has succumbed to a bad heart, the younger priest attacks the demon in the possessed girl screaming "take me, take me." And then you see the demon leave the girl, enter the priest, and launch him out the window over a long flight of steps to his death.

It was pointed out that this was not a successful exorcism because the demon wasn't cast out but just transferred from one host to another. Yet, the girl was healed, so to my mind the priest gave his life to save the girl and is therefore an image of Christ, **who gives his life for us by taking our demons, illnesses, and mortality into himself, destroying them on the cross while raising us to new life in God.**

I think of demons, not as evil beings outside the self, **but as persistent thought patterns within us that have a profound negative influence on our wellbeing.** Jealousy, rage or an inferiority complex, to name a few, make it difficult for us to do the good we want to do.

I remember the first time I experienced jealousy: I was a senior in high school and my first real girlfriend said she would be attending our playoff soccer game in downtown Atlanta and would ride the team bus home with me. But she didn't ride the bus and I didn't know what had happened to her until as I was waiting at school for my mother to pick me up, a car full of the cool guys pulls up with her in the backseat laughing.

I, however, was not laughing. Instead, I was being introduced to inner forces I had never experienced before. At 17, I had little defense against what was happening in my mind. I grew up in a culture that shamed boys for expressing emotions, so I ended up repressing them, which made me numb... until the volcano erupts.

It would be years before I learned that it is possible to work with such overwhelming experiences in the mind.

The first step is to recognize and acknowledge when we are in its grip.

At 17, I didn't think I was in the grip of something, I thought those thoughts and emotions were who I was. **I had no ability to see from the perspective of my True Self in God that these forces are like thunder storms rolling across the landscape blocking out the sun and the sky, but only for a time.** When they are gone the sun comes out and the sky is still blue.

When we can say, "I'm feeling anger" instead of saying "I am angry", we've taken a first step to that place where we can rest in our larger Self and breathe.

Even if all we can say to ourselves is, **"God, this emotion is really strong right now"**, we're waking up and growing in awareness.

But as followers of Christ, we are able to cry out, "Lord Jesus, help me with these mindstorms. Breathe your light and peace into my hurting mind."

As we do this, Jesus draws close to us. We may not go from 60 to 0 in three minutes, but our foot is off the gas and we start to slow down. We notice space and peace gently rising in our minds. **Healing has begun and we are heading back into our right mind.**

But it is not enough to just get over this attack, because we know we are just **one-button-being-pushed** away from exploding again and there are destructive, demonic cultural forces working to push our buttons. Look at our toxic politics, for example.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 12:43.

"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. ⁴⁴ Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. ⁴⁵ Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first."

In other words, we must practice our faith: through prayer, Bible reading, fellowship, service, and even seeing a therapist, in order to grow in the ability to trust the Divine Beloved to protect and heal us.

Otherwise, we will be like a person recovering from food poisoning who gets up in the morning and eats rotten eggs.

 Jesus says: "I am the bread of life... whoever eats me will live because of me." In other words, "Receive my suffering, cross, and resurrection into your life, so that you may grow up into your Divine Self that is not overwhelmed by your mindstorms."

When Jesus is a theological abstraction, our faith is just a bunch of ideas bouncing around in our heads and we are defenseless against the power of the mindstorms when they assault us.

Of course, for Apostle Paul, Jesus is no abstraction, but God in flesh; and faith is not a bunch of ideas about Christ, but a living relationship with Christ in the depths of our being.

Therefore, Paul tells us daily to live into our relationship with Christ, so we won't be defenseless against the powers that threaten us.

The Message translates Paul this way.

"Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get... Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. **Learn how to apply them.** You'll need them throughout your life." Ephesians 6:10ff

Paul is saying that it's not enough to fight our negative thinking or the negative culture. We must learn how to open our minds to God. I find helpful repeating this prayer from Tosha Silver helpful:

**Divine Beloved:
 I am Yours.
 You are mine.
 We are One.
 All is well.**

Then we can say with Peter:

"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Divine Beloved:

I am Yours.

You are mine.

We are One.

All is well.