

Demons. Not a topic that comes up in conversation much. When is the last time you had a good conversation about demons? Probably for most of us it hasn't been since 2005 when the movie the Exorcism of Emily Rose came out. The big question everyone was asking then was, "Do you believe in demons?" As if it were the same as asking if you believe in ghosts. But, believe or not, there they are, in the Gospel.

Our modern sensibilities are disturbed by a gospel story like this—what can seem to us to be a primitive world-view that is populated with all kinds of good and evil beings—stories in which we people seem to be pawns in some cosmic battle for our souls.

Demons. We see them in the gospel. But we do so with some embarrassment, and maybe dismissal.

Before moving to Boston I taught chemistry and physics at a Jesuit high school in Texas. I was surprised by how often the topic of demons would come up in class. Now I understand that the main reason the students would bring up something like this was to distract me from teaching molecular orbital theory, or quantum mechanics, or whatever was in my lesson plan, ... but they were genuinely interested in the topic.

Almost always they were looking for one of two things.

On the one hand, asking me as a Jesuit, my students would look to me for fascinating and otherworldly encounters like the priest in the movie The Exorcist. The kids wanted scary stories of heads spinning and green goo. Little girls croaking in Latin. Really they just wanted entertainment—ghost stories with a religious catch.

On the other hand, asking me as a biophysicist, as a scientist, they were looking to me to dismiss demons – to dismiss this embarrassingly primitive and misguided world-view that gave some kind of being to good and evil – angels and demons. I mean, don't we now know that the "demons" of the New Testament are really just things like epilepsy and other physical or psychological disorders. There are no demonic antagonists in our world. Right?

I think that both of these perspectives should be avoided. Must be avoided if we are to hear and be changed by today's gospel reading.

We cannot give in to the Hollywood / cinematic version. It is a little spiritually unhealthy to desire scary ghost stories thinly veiled in just enough religious concepts to allow our faith to help us suspend our otherwise rational perspective. But on the other hand, we cannot dismiss today's gospel. Although we find such a story a bit scandalous, a stumbling block, a little embarrassing ...

we dismiss it at our own peril. Because Jesus is shown doing something very important. He casts out the evil. His love and power overcomes evil.

We should not be so arrogant as to suggest that our world-view is so superior to that of the first century biblical author that we can learn nothing from an episode like this.

Much of what was included under the umbrella of demonology in the bible are things that we are just now rediscovering—something we have tried to forget. We are uncomfortable with the idea of powers or spirits influencing our actions and limiting our freedom, yet we experience these all the time.

If nothing else, we experience social and unwilled sin. ... Patterns of thought and action that we simply do not choose, but that we nevertheless possess. Evils ... sins ... that do not seem to come up in the confessional...because we didn't choose them.

One of the most socially destructive forces in our society is just such a demon. Prejudice. We don't choose our prejudices. We inherit them from society from our families. We learn them. We are born into them. ... Prejudices are subtle hatreds for people who are different from us...simply because of who they are. Different because of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, language, culture, whatever.

These demons have wrecked untold damage in our society. The great evils of recent human history – slavery, segregation, the holocaust – are all due to this demon. The demon of prejudice. The demon that allows us to even subtly hate another human being for reasons that they did not choose. We don't invent prejudice. We don't choose it. It exists as a pattern of thought before we are born, and continues after we die – unless we are healed from it. Unless we break the cycle.

One of the most personally destructive demons is that of addiction. Addiction is a pattern of behavior that, although possibly chosen at some level, once initiated takes away our self-control – destroys our freedom. This demon is responsible for a huge amount of suffering in our society. It is not some creepy being. It is not the demons of Hollywood. It is not something to be afraid of, but it is something to be taken seriously. It is a pattern of behavior that we do not fully choose, but that at least partially determines our actions—in a direction we don't want to go.

But demons don't only pester individuals or individual relationships. We see the world crying out against them. The disorder in economics and government that have been the focus of the Occupy movement are structures that hurt people, not by choice, but because there is something wrong in the system. A problem that is hard to articulate, hard to describe, but we know something is wrong. They even cause wars. They pre-

date us, they continue after us. They have a peculiar kind of existence. The bible calls these demons. And we should not dismiss them.

The reality is – on some level. We all have demons. We all have patterns of thought and action that we do not choose that inhibit our freedom, our love, our ability to be the person we want to be and create the society we want to have.

Be it prejudice, addiction, abuse, violence, unjust social order, paralyzing anxiety, the list goes on and on. We all suffer from demons. Inherited patterns that don't go away without intervention.

But the gospel says that there is hope. Jesus has power over demons. He can cast them out. We have access to healing, if we are willing to submit ourselves to the healing of God's love with the help of one another, we can break free of our patterns of sin. There are ways. Sacramental and non-sacramental.

Anyone familiar with the 12 step program will know that the basis of the 12 steps is the recognition that we are powerless in the face of our demons. We need help to break free of them. And we have that help in God and one another.

But when our demons encounter Jesus – just like in the Gospel story – they cry out. And don't want to go away. This is true for whatever demons we may have, in a long list. But I'm just going to focus on exorcising some prejudice demons tonight.

When we encounter Jesus loving everyone without prejudice our prejudices rise up and cry out – you mean I'm supposed to love THAT person? I'm supposed to love white people? Black people? Spanish-speaking people? Protestants? Moslems? Gay people? Straight people? Poor people? Rich people? Whatever our subtle hatreds find offensive. And then the excuses, our justifications, come flowing. Do you feel it? A tendency to resist what I'm saying? To justify disliking some category I mentioned?

But Jesus looks at our excuses, our rantings that justify our hatreds, and he says "Be quiet!" "Come out!" He says, "Yes, you are supposed to love everyone. Like I do. Not tolerate. Love. Give yourself. Respect. Listen. Understand. Have compassion."

If we try. This evening. In this Eucharist. As we see almighty God, come to us in the humblest form – food – and present himself to *anyone* who comes forward in faith to receive him. *Anyone*. Let us hear his voice and harden not our hearts. Let us *open* our hearts to the Lord. Let him silence our demons, our resistance. Let us see that we are all the same before God. And maybe we, as a group, will leave this Mass with a few less demons.