

Children

I brought with me a mushroom this morning. As you probably know, some mushrooms are edible. That is, we can eat them. Other mushrooms are poisonous. It would be dangerous to eat one of them, wouldn't it? Now, how do you tell the difference between a poisonous mushroom and a non-poisonous one? The answer is you cannot. Oh, experts have ways of telling. That's why we can buy mushrooms in the store. But the average person simply cannot tell one from the other. Now, what does that mean for you and me? It means that we should never pick a mushroom and eat it, doesn't it? It could very well be dangerous.

Can you tell by looking at a person whether he or she is a good person or not? Well, that's hard to say. Sometimes people who look real good on the outside are as mean as they can be. Some people who look really very rough can turn out to be some of the nicest people in the world. We should never pass judgement on another person by the way he or she looks.

And sometimes even the nicest people can forget who they are and do things they know they should not do. That's the difference between mushrooms and people. Mushrooms are either poisonous or they are not. People are not quite that simple. Sometimes any of us--even the smartest of us--might do something really stupid. That's why God forgives us. He doesn't have to forgive mushrooms. Mushrooms can't help being what they are, but we can choose. I am glad when I do something stupid that God love me and forgives me, aren't you? All of us can be thankful for God's love and forgiveness.



I

The Apostle Paul is seen by many as having a dismal view of marriage. He is even suspected by some as having had an unhappy marriage himself which sadly colored his regard for matrimony itself. A few wonder if his references to his "thorn in his flesh" is his personal description of his nagging wife.

But, in all fairness, let us put his comments about marriage and families into historic context before we draw any conclusions or make any deductions about the apostle himself.

Christians were expecting the imminent return of the Lord Jesus. They really were, and it was very real! Every morning could well be the last day of waiting. Every night could be the eve of the Christ's appearance. This whole atmosphere of expectancy pervaded their daily lives. They went about their day-by-day affairs in the climate of apocalyptic anticipation.

Now in the light of this, try to picture in your minds the adjustments you would need to make. For example, imagine how you might question the wisdom of entering into a wedlock which could have no permanency. But surely, you would decide, any marriage already existing must be maintained as an honorable obligation, if nothing more, and even more if you loved your spouse. The whole matter of marriage, of parenthood, of family and home relationships was bound to be affected by the uncertainties of eschatology. While the second coming of Christ Jesus was awaited with eager gladness, it must also have produced much perplexity and, to be honest, a lot of fear. Ordinary people could not possibly handle a tremendous thing like that with perfectly easy, untroubled minds. You couldn't. I couldn't.

So, like a good pastor, Saint Paul is addressing himself to his beloved congregation in Corinth about their real and actual concerns. He is writing, not about abstractions, but about the "nitty-gritty" of Christian life. What he says about marriage is "nuts and bolts" religion.

The very first thing he says is exactly what pastors always want to say, "I want you to be free of anxieties." He is assuring the Christians of his time that whatever God brings to pass will prove a blessing.

This is always the test of our faith - to trust confidently that God intends to give us what is good, indeed that God overcomes badness with goodness. This is what the Resurrection is all about!

When Confederate forces finally retreated from cities like Richmond or Atlanta, they set fire to warehouses stored with munitions and supplies which couldn't be transported. Of course those fires spread and great destruction resulted. Suffering was widespread. People must surely have felt terribly forsaken and defeated. Their world was ending in disaster! Their cause had collapsed! With what dread and foreboding they awaited the arrival of conquering Federal troops!

Most of my ministry has been in large Northern cities, but in all the years of my Southern upbringing I have never once heard anybody in Dixie express the slightest wish that the Civil War had ended differently, that the Confederacy had endured, that America had permanently divided. Southerners tend to be intensely patriotic, deeply loyal Americans, and cities like Richmond or Atlanta have thrived and prospered! Strange how so often what seems the end of our worlds becomes their new beginnings. History never defeats God. Christians ought to trust that. It's the only cure for anxiety.

Next, the Apostle Paul writes about distractions. The Christian is not to let his interests be divided, Saint Paul urges. Important as pleasing one's wife is, the paramount concern of a Christian is "how to please the Lord," to quote Pastor Paul directly. Christ calls for the total commitment in his followers that he demonstrated in his own life.

A real artist does not ask himself how little of his life and talent he must give. When somebody asked Tintoretto what he mixed with his paints to achieve the special red color so characteristic of his paintings, he said, "Blood!" Even so the Christian life demands our all.

Accordingly, Saint Paul makes no attempt to deny or decry the validity of marriage for his Corinthian Christians. He only warns that nothing, not even the sacred bonds of matrimony, must be permitted to distract Christians from the centrality of their devotion to God in Christ. Nothing must deter the Christian from wholly following the teaching and example of Christ. By extension, this truth applies not only to marriage but to anything else which competes with or distracts from total Christian commitment - patriotism, vocational occupation, military orders, economic profit, social conventions, established traditions, or anything else in a nearly endless list. When we give our lives to Christ, Saint Paul is convinced, we give all of it. No half-way surrenders are acceptable.

Finally, the Apostle Paul emphasizes that his motive in writing to the Christians at Corinth is not solely to offer counsel about marriage but "to promote good order and to secure undivided devotion to the Lord." In other words, to help alleviate confusion.

Nothing has afflicted churches much more in all ages than has confusion. What an unruly, contentious lot we humans are! We seem so much more easily divided than easily united. We let opinions become dogmas. We let denominations become abominations. We let ourselves separate into "us and them" enclaves. We break the bond of peace in the name of the Prince of Peace. Shame, shame!

Undoubtedly there was division within the Corinthian church community about marriage. Pastor Paul was trying to alleviate it, and to read the whole seventh chapter of First Corinthians, actually Saint Paul's response to a letter he had received from Corinth, is to observe how broadmindedly and irenically he was mediating both sides of a controversy. He demonstrates what Christians must always know: that conflicts must be faced and then settled in hope and love.

Turbulence and confusion are not productive, however exciting they may be. When oil is first discovered the gusher often flares and flames, sometimes for several days. It's an

exhilarating sight to be sure. But when an oil well is capped, when oil is pumped through pipes into refineries, and sent on its way to the work of the world, only then is it useful; until then it is wasted.

Are there church people who vainly imagine that nothing cleans out their church like a good, noisy row? Do some even suppose there is something pentecostal about an explosion? It's easy to see how something as intimate and personal as marriage could generate strong feelings within the Corinthian church, even confusion. But Saint Paul is certain that it is counterproductive. Confusion only weakens Christian witness. Maybe even stops it altogether.

This, above all, the apostle cannot permit. He knows there must be no wavering in the mission of Christianity. This God-given purpose overrides all else, has eternal precedence, is forever the main, central, paramount concern of every Christian until the reign and rule of righteousness is established in all the world.

It surely isn't easy to subordinate all our human interests to that one purpose. When Columbus got back from his voyage, he had to prove that he had discovered a new world. Words were not sufficient. His proof was the American Indians he brought back to Spain with him. They were a new kind of people. Nobody in Spain had seen their race before. They were Columbus' certain evidence.

Just so, Saint Paul understood that Christ's Kingdom was a new world. This could be believed only if Christians could be seen as a new kind of people. The extending, expanding love of God first seen in the shining of an Epiphany Star makes us a new kind of people. We can deal with different things without quarreling. We can anticipate great changes without undue anxieties. We can maintain good order and central purpose. God's light does not waver. When we are his, we don't either.

In this steadfastness, Christians make their witness. This is what saints have always been, steadily shining lights in all generations. They even shine on through following ages. We who are Christ's are witnesses to the reality of a world unseen, pathfinders in a spiritual pilgrimage, coming back to tell of open roads and of the City of God at the end. We stand as witnesses to the fulfilled possibilities of life, of what God can do for all who journey by faith.

II

Today we're going to talk about casting out demons or, as Mark calls them in today's lesson, unclean spirits. It's not a subject that we talk about very much in church anymore, even though it figures prominently in the New Testament. Maybe at the end of today's service I will perform an exorcism and cast out a demon . . . or not. Perhaps you have someone in mind that you think could profit from such an exorcism. But enough about members of Congress . . .

Some of you will remember a movie that caused quite a stir back in the 1970s called "The Exorcist." The movie was set at Georgetown University. "The Exorcist" was written by a Georgetown alumnus, William Peter Blatty, and it was based on events that were reportedly true, the story of a child brought to Georgetown because of its reputation as a medical center and because of the community of priests that live on campus. The child, a boy, was brought there because it was believed that he suffered from demonic possession.

In the movie it is a 12-year-old girl who is demon-possessed. We know she's possessed by these unclean spirits because she displays strange and aggressive behaviors after playing with a Ouija board. She is constantly swearing and she displays abnormal strength, which, we learn, are early symptoms of demonic possession. Now you know the signs to look for in your 12-year-old.

The movie details this girl's mother's desperate attempts to win back her child through an exorcism conducted by two of the priests following psychiatrists. And the results are horrific. Before you run home and download it for family viewing, let me hasten to say that, several years ago, "The Exorcist" was named by both *Entertainment Weekly* and Movies.com as the scariest film of all time. There is a mental hospital filled with people who went crazy from seeing the movie. The scene in today's text from the Gospel of Mark is far less dramatic than that portrayed in the movie.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. The people are amazed at his teaching, Mark tells us, because he taught as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. This is why people flocked to hear him. They knew, when he spoke, what he said was important.

Christ had barely begun his teaching this particular day, however, when a man in the synagogue began to cry out, and the interesting thing is he spoke in the third person plural: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" Then he reverts to the first person singular, "I know who you are the Holy One of God!"

Mark explains to us that this man who was crying out was possessed by an unclean spirit. We don't know if this means that the man was mentally deranged, but we might guess that he probably was. Sadly, such people do exist, of course. (Story of Jack DeRosen)

"Quiet!" Jesus said sternly. "Come out of him!" Mark tells us the unclean spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The scene is a bit disturbing, but it doesn't last long enough to make a scene worthy of Hollywood. Now this man who formerly had an unclean spirit is sitting there calm and composed listening with all the others to Jesus teach.

The people are all so amazed that they ask each other, "What is this? A new teaching with authority . . . He even gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey him." People

began grabbing their smart phones and texting to their friends all over the whole region of Galilee, "You won't believe what happened at church this morning!"

They didn't communicate their excitement exactly like that, of course, but wouldn't it be wonderful if when something exciting happened in worship, that we would tell our friends? I hope that if something in church does excite you, whatever it may be, that you will say something about it to your friends on Facebook or Twitter or some other social media. Share your joy.

The only social media the people in first century Galilee had was person-to-person, but Mark tells us that the word spread all over the region. Here's a man who teaches with authority and he has power over the demons as well. Quite a resume! Let's talk a few minutes today about demons or unclean spirits.

Is there an unclean spirit troubling you? First can you be Possessed Not all unclean spirits are supernatural powers that inhabit people's minds and cause them to foam at the mouth and tear at their clothes. They may be sitting here placidly listening to this message and having thoughts of suicide or even violence toward another person. But before you ask for an exorcism, the first place to stop is Behavioral Health. There is no disgrace to talk with a professional about your problems. Don't be embarrassed. Mental problems are no different from physical problems. You wouldn't hesitate to see a doctor if you had a sharp pain in your side. You certainly should not hesitate if you are dealing with obsessive thoughts or if you cannot pull yourself out of a deep depression. Get help or gently urge someone you love to get help. Some of the finest people who have ever lived have had times in their life when they were tormented by such demons. Don't suffer any longer if you are in that situation.

There are other kinds of unclean spirits that work in quieter but equally troubling ways.

For example, many of us are controlled by our fears. A British publisher once asked several laymen to write some sermons to be published under the title, "If I Could Preach Only Once." Among those invited to contribute was the late Gilbert Chesterton, an English journalist and author. "If I had only one sermon to preach," wrote Chesterton, "it would be a sermon against fear." Fear is a demon that cripples many fine people.

That's one reason that many people are carrying guns today. Did you know that? A reporter interviewed a cross section of people recently with licenses to carry fire arms, and that is what he found. Many people feel the need to protect themselves and their families from unknown threats and so they're buying guns. That's in spite of the fact that many of us have never known anybody who was the victim of a violent attack. From watching television, though, you would think danger lurks everywhere. Fear is a terrible thing. For some, it is the fear of being attacked. For others, it can be as seemingly benign as the fear of being rejected or being laughed at. Some people are haunted by the fear that somehow they do not belong, that they do not measure up.

Author Steve Chandler compares it to the feeling some of us had in high school—that everyone was cool but us. Did you ever feel like that? Chandler says many people feel like they've "been left stranded in high school forever. Would you really like to be a teenager again. Like something happened there that we've never shaken off.

"Before high school, in our earlier and more carefree childhoods," says Chandler, "we were creative dreamers filled with a boundless sense of energy and wonder.

"But in high school something got turned around. For the first time in our lives, we began fearing what other people were thinking of us. All of a sudden our mission in life

became not to be embarrassed. We were afraid to look bad, and so we made it a point not to take risks.” (1) How can you live a happy and productive life if you are constantly afraid of being humiliated?

In an interview years ago David Brinkley asked advice columnist Ann Landers what question she most frequently received from readers. She said the question she was most asked was, “What’s wrong with me?” (2)

Do you have that feeling from time to time that something’s wrong with you, that you do not somehow measure up, that you do not belong? That’s a demon that holds many good people back.

Fear is related to another unclean spirit that controls many people. It is the spirit of anger. Many people today are filled with free-floating anger and they’re just waiting to explode.

Chuck Swindoll in his book *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life* uses the example of a camel. He says that camels may build up a pressure cooker of resentment toward their owners. Finally that resentment will explode and the camel goes berserk.

In Asia, when a camel driver senses trouble, he will give his coat to the animal. The camel takes out its resentment on the garment jumping on it, biting it, tearing it to pieces. When the camel feels it has blown its top enough, man and animal can live together in harmony again. (4)

Don’t you wish that would work with human beings? Anger is certainly an unclean spirit.

Jim Taylor in *Currents* magazine tells about his friend, Ralph Milton. One morning Ralph awakened to a noise that sounded like someone repairing boilers on his roof. He looked at his clock. It was 5:00 a.m. Still in his pajamas, he went into the back yard to investigate. He found a woodpecker on his TV antenna, “pounding its little brains out on the metal pole.”

Angry at the little creature who ruined his sleep, Ralph picked up a rock and threw it. The rock sailed over the house, and he heard a distant crash as it hit his car. In utter disgust, Ralph took a vicious kick at a clod of dirt, only to remember too late that he was still in his bare feet. The woodpecker was still pounding but now Ralph had a broken car window and a sore foot.

Anger does so much damage, to ourselves and to others. Angry cynical people die young. Men who score high for hostility on standard tests are four times more likely to die prematurely than men whose scores are low. (6)

Anxiety and anger are certainly unclean spirits. But the number of unclean spirits in the world is manifold. **The most deadly of all of these spirits is the spirit that tells us we are unnoticed and unloved.**

On December 14, 2012, twenty children and six adults were killed at the Sandy Hook elementary school by 20-year-old Adam Lanza, who had earlier killed his mother, Nancy Lanza, in their home. As police approached the school, Lanza took his own life.

It is the third-deadliest mass shooting in US history.

A police report reveals that Adam Lanza possessed a list of 500 of the world’s most notorious mass murderers, and was trying to rack up the greatest number of kills in history.

Could we agree that Adam Lanza was possessed by an unclean spirit? It was a spirit that told him his life didn't matter that he was unnoticed and unloved. The only way to rectify his situation was to rack up a world record. Then people would notice.

Psychologist Dr. D. Ross Campbell studied young people attracted to religious cults back in the 1960s and 70s. He said these cults were quite adept at exploiting the feelings of being unnoticed and unloved. He described how one group that was particularly successful, the so-called Moonies, went about this exploitation.

He told of an emotionally charged session in which several Moonies surrounded a young man. This young man was required to think back into his childhood and remember painful moments. He told of an incident when he was three years old. He remembered feeling lonely and distressed, and tried to seek comfort in physical contact from his mother. His mother did not have time for him at that moment and he felt rejected. Then the Moonies embraced him repeatedly, giving him the physical contact he longed for. They also stated repeatedly that they loved him (implying, of course, that his mother did not). (7) Even though their founder is deceased, they continue and they own and operate the University of Bridgeport in CT

Who among us has not harbored this feeling at some time in our lives? I'm nobody. Nobody notices me. No one appreciates me.

Is that the unclean spirit that is troubling you? Do you feel unnoticed and unloved? If there is one unclean spirit that the gospel of Jesus Christ should dispel, it is this one. You are loved. Jesus said it so beautifully in Luke 12:6, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (6-7).

I joked that I might perform an exorcism at the end of this service."Drive out from them every unclean spirit that is making its lair in their hearts.

III Fr Joseph Pellegrino

It is said that the following incident took place off of Massachusetts back in the early 50's. It was a stormy night at sea and a large battleship saw a light in the distance. The light was directly on the ship's course. The captain of the ship was alerted and had a radio message sent out: "Light up ahead, bear ten degrees south." The captain received the reply, "Sir, you must bear ten degrees North." The captain grew furious and got onto the radio himself and yelled, "I am Captain James Smith, that's captain in the United States Navy. Whoever you are, I am ordering you to bear ten degrees south. Who are you, and what is your rank?" He heard the feeble answer, "This is Seaman First Class Howard Scott, Sir, you must bear ten degrees north." The captain barked out, "I am on the bridge of the Battleship USS New Jersey, and I am telling you to bear ten degrees south." Then he heard the reply, "But, Sir, I am in the Baker's Island Light House, and you had better bear ten degrees North."

A statement carries authority according to two aspects: who is speaking and what is being said. The captain had authority due to his rank. The seaman had authority due to what was said. Jesus had both. He had authority because of Who He was. He was the Son of God, the Messiah of God, and the Eternal One who became

man on Christmas. He also had authority due to what He said. He spoke the Father's Word to us. He said, "Love your enemies. Be kind to one another." He spoke with His actions. He spoke about God's kingdom and lived as the ideal member of that kingdom. He himself was a kind, loving person. On the cross, He called to His Father for forgiveness for those who were torturing and killing Him. He had authority, and He has authority. We need to listen and follow.

He calls us to speak for Him. He gives us authority. For us to exercise this authority we must live as committed Christians.

Many times our papers report religious scandals. Charismatic TV preachers, Roman Catholic bishops and priests, have been caught acting in the immoral ways. The message that they had been delivering from their pulpits for years was true. Many people were moved to come closer to God. Many people confronted their own demons and took steps to change their lives. They recognized that the clergyman had authority. But when the scandal hit the papers, the clergyman's message lost its impact. The one who delivered it was not true to his own words. As a result, his credibility, his authority was destroyed.

We all have authority. We have authority as Christians and as Roman Catholics. People recognize this authority when they ask us, "What is it that you believe? How is it that you are so happy?" We have the authority to answer, "We believe in the real presence of the Lord in Word and Sacrament. So often we know that we have a special relationship with the Lord. We particularly experience this in our liturgies and in Eucharistic Adoration." But if we throw away our relationship with the Lord in order to join others in immorality, others see this and no longer give us authority to speak for the Lord. If we are hypocritical, people will not want to hear us speak about Jesus.

Parents and grandparents have an additional authority. Parents and grandparents have authority due to their position in the family. God tells children to honor their mothers and fathers. That is the Fourth Commandment. Grandparents have the authority as patriarchs and matriarchs of their families. But the authority of parents and grandparents is diminished or even destroyed when they act in ways that are not Christian. For example, all parents want their children to be kind to each other. But if their children observe Mom and Dad being nasty to each other, the children are going to learn nastiness, not kindness, as standard way of acting. When these same parents say to their children that they should be kind to each other, the children respond with their actions that their parents no longer have authority to tell them how to behave.

That is negative. Let us look at the positive. Many of our seniors have spent years taking care of their sick spouses. Retirement was not what they expected. Instead of going and doing, their days were spent caring and cleaning, and organizing doctor appointments. But when someone makes a comment that he or she is such a good spouse, the caring spouse merely says, "I took vows." And in those few words supported with a lifetime of action, that husband or wife speaks more eloquently

about marriage than any priest or preacher could possibly speak. For his or her words have authority, the authority of the One who called him to the sacrament of marriage and the authority of the spouse who lives the sacrament of marriage.

There are times that people confront us for living a clean life. They even mock us. But deep within themselves, they want to be like us. They give us authority to reveal God's Word to them.

Jesus did not call us just to do some of the things He did, He called us to be His presence for others. We are called to destroy evil in our world. We cannot do this unless we are determined to be Christ like. We have to speak in the way that Jesus spoke. Jesus spoke with authority. He was not like the scribes and Pharisees. He was not two faced. He was not hypocritical. He didn't have a dark side of his life that he kept hidden. He did not just speak the truth, He was the Truth Incarnate. Jesus gave orders to unclean spirits, and they obeyed Him. It was not just His words that expelled demons. It was the person who spoke those words.

Today we pray that we use the authority we have received well by living genuine, sincere Christian lives. For there are many people who give us the authority to point them to the One who makes all life complete.