1

Children

As the children gather in the front of the sanctuary, I extract a large rubber band from my pocket. I dangle it from my index finger and ask one of the closer children to hook a finger through the other end. Once she has done so, I gently begin to pull the rubber band taut. Just as I am about to explain the concept of tension, the rubber band snaps! It is always wise to be prepared for surprises (Divine intervention?) during the children's sermon; I reach in my pocket for another rubber band and reconnect with a now cautious child who will only allow a minimum of tension to be placed on this one.

"The stress Lucy and I are putting on this rubber band," I explain to the children, "is what we call tension. You have already seen what happens if the tension is too great."

"Yeah," Alan agrees. "The rubber band breaks!" Lucy winces noticeably with this pronouncement.

"In some ways," I continue, "our lives are like this rubber band. Many situations and relationships tug us in many different directions. Tension builds up. And if there is too much tension, what happens?"

"We break?" Jean Paul asks tentatively.

"Yes," I answer, "we break -- maybe not on the outside where other people can see it, but we feel snapped-in-two inside. Outward expressions of too much tension inside of us include things like tears and anger.

"Now suppose I wanted to loosen the tension on this rubber band," I suggest. "What would I need to do?"

"Let go of it," several children respond. Another anxious look passes across Lucy's face as she leans toward me in case I follow this suggestion.

"Yes," I answer, "to loosen the tension, one or both of us would have to let go of the rubber band. But if I just let go of my end, what's going to happen to Lucy?" I ask.

"Her fingers will get popped!" comes a very certain reply.

"So what do I need to do to be sure Lucy doesn't get hurt?" I ask.

"Let go slowly," one child answers.

"Yes, I must let go, slowly and gently, easing off on the tension we have created between us. Now, suppose that instead of a rubber band, there was the tension of anger between us. What would I need to do to get rid of that tension?"

"Let go of it?" a child asks.

"Let go of what?" I respond.

"Your anger?" he guesses.

"Yes; I would need to let go of my anger. I would need to forgive Lucy for whatever I thought she had done to cause my anger. I would need to speak kind, gentle words to her, to let her know I had let go of my anger, to ease the tension.

"When Saint Paul wrote to the folks in a place called Ephesus, one of the things he said in his letter was, 'Don't let the sun go down on your anger.' What do you think he meant by that?"

This proves to be too much for their young minds to grasp, so I ask another question. "What happens when the sun goes down?"

"It gets dark," the children tell me.

"And what do you do when it gets dark?" I continue.

"Go to bed," many of them answer.

"So, when Saint Paul says, 'Don't let the sun go down on your anger,' he's saying if you are angry, let go of it right away. Don't let your anger hang on day after day. Don't go to bed without forgiving the person you are angry with or letting go of the situation that you have reacted to with anger.

"You've all seen what happens to a rubber band when too much tension is put on it. The same thing happens to people when they let tension build up. We all get angry sometimes. But it is very important to learn to let go of that anger and not let it break us up inside."

Adult

The idea of casting out an evil spirit sounds too much like superstition to many of us. We prefer to relegate such things to the mindset of a pre-scientific world.

Perhaps it is because we have been exposed to so much human evil in our century. William Barclay tells of a traveler in Soviet Georgia in the days before the Second World War. She was taken to see a very humble old woman in a little cottage. The old peasant woman asked her if she was going to Moscow. The traveler said she was. "Then, " asked the woman, "would you mind delivering a parcel of homemade toffee to my son? He cannot get anything like it in Moscow." Her son's name was Josef Stalin. This is the Stalin of youth but the same Stalin who is said to have murdered millions of his own people in his adulthood.

Confronted with monsters like Stalin and Adolph Hitler who seemed in every respect normal human beings but found it possible to rationalize barbaric behavior, we feel no need to look behind every bush for demonic spirits. The human face of evil is enough.

Outside the Christian community, however, there is tremendous interest in the demonic. Hollywood has discovered that our primordial fears are fertile ground for grinding out one gory horror movie after another. Interest in the occult and witchcraft is probably more widespread in western society than at any time since the Salem witch trials. I am told that there are more self-proclaimed witches today in Paris, France than there are Roman Catholic priests. Since that is traditionally a Roman Catholic stronghold, such a statistic is disturbing.

Some people contend that the resurgence of interest in the occult and witchcraft is a sign of our society's hunger for the supernatural. I am not sure. Perhaps such people are looking for a cheap thrill.

We really do not know what the New Testament means when it speaks of casting out evil spirits. Is it referring to mental and emotional illness? Would physical problems with unusual manifestations such as epilepsy have been considered demonic in a pre-scientific world? Most scholars are convinced that this is the nature of so-called demon possession in the Scriptures. Does this mean that we should forget these stories and consign such problems to modern medicine and psychiatry? Absolutely not! Jesus still casts out demons whether they be physical, emotional or spiritual.

**GOOD RELIGION HEALS THE BODY.** Modern science has helped us see more clearly than ever before that there is a remarkable interrelationship between the mind, the soul and the body. Our thoughts and our attitudes can literally make us sick. We know that.

Of course, we must approach this subject with care. We are not advocating replacing medicine with so-called "faith healing." This is a field where so much damage has been done by spiritual quacks that most responsible religious people are even afraid to approach the subject. Even as great a man as Mahatma Gandhi was guilty of a grievous error in this regard. Gandhi's wife was severely ill with pneumonia and was fading. Gandhi refused to let her have penicillin, arguing that alien substances should not be introduced into the body. Accordingly, his wife died.

A similar tragedy befell the Larry Parker family. In his book, WE LET OUR SON DIE, Larry records the tragic story of the devastation his family experienced when their diabetic eleven year-old died.

Why did the boy die? Because the family "by faith" withheld his insulin. They were encouraged by friends and their pastor to take this so-called "step of faith."

Such actions are not steps of faith. Penicillin and insulin are themselves gifts from God. I believe in prayer but I look at the two hands of prayer and I see one hand open to God and the other reaching out to the world.

Good health is God's plan for life. The greatest enemies our bodies have are our own destructive habits.We know, for example, that vigorous daily exercise will add years to our life. Excessive worry or stress can subtract those years. Smoking more than two packs of cigarettes a day will cost us many more years. The greatest enemies of our bodies are our own bad habits.

The greatest ally we have in maintaining the healthfulness of our bodies is first of all the conviction that our bodies are the temple of the living God therefore we must not mistreat them and secondly the confidence that if we trust in God He will provide for our needs. Thus we can relax and enjoy life. We are delivered from the destructiveness of nervous habits and sleepless nights.

Not only is trust in God good preventive medicine, there is evidence that there is healing power in such faith even for the body already diseased.

Some people, when they are given bad news by a doctor immediately fold up emotionally. Their worst fears have been realized and thus they simply give in to the inevitable. That doesn't have to happen.

Sean Swarner is an incredible example of triumph over adversity. At the age of 13, he was diagnosed with stage IV Hodgkin's lymphoma and given only three months to live. Remarkably, he survived despite his grim prognosis after rigorous treatments of chemotherapy and radiation.

However, Sean's battle with cancer wasn’t over. At age 16, he was diagnosed with a different form of cancer—Askin's sarcoma, a rare and aggressive cancer. Despite the odds stacked against him, Sean didn't give up hope.

Miraculously, he not only survived a second cancer but also achieved something extraordinary. He decided to push the boundaries of what was considered possible for cancer survivors. He decided to climb. He became the first cancer survivor to reach the summit of Mount Everest, the highest peak in the world, in 2002.

But Sean didn't stop there. He set out to climb the tallest peak on each continent, aiming to inspire and give hope to cancer patients. His incredible journey took him to the top of the Seven Summits, an accomplishment known as the "Explorer's Grand Slam."

Through his foundation, the Sean Swarner Cancer Climbs, he continues to motivate and support individuals affected by cancer, demonstrating that despite the most daunting challenges, the human spirit, perseverance, and a positive mindset can achieve remarkable feats.

Sean Swarner’s story is a testament to resilience, courage, and the limitless potential of the human spirit. Today Sean is a speaker and author inspiring others. I like to put it this way: Good religion heals the body. I believe Sean is still alive today, years later, because of his attitude and determination.

This is not to say that disease need not ever be fatal. If that were true none of us would ever die. That is ridiculous. It is to say,however, that we are a unitary being. We cannot separate our lifestyle from your general well-being. The best possible lifestyle is one in which we trust God and live responsibly in the light of His love. Good religion heals the body.

**GOOD RELIGION ALSO HEALS THE EMOTIONS.** All of us sometimes reach the breaking point emotionally. There is a story about a monastery in Europe perched high on a cliff several hundred feet in the air. The only way to reach the monastery was to be suspended in a basket which was pulled to the top by several monks who pulled and tugged with all their strength. Obviously, the ride up the steep cliff in that basket was terrifying. One tourist got exceedingly nervous about halfway up as he noticed that the rope by which he was suspended was old and frayed. With a trembling voice he asked the monk who was riding with him in the basket how often they changed the rope. The monk thought for a moment and answered brusquely, "Whenever it breaks."

There have been times in my life when emotionally I have been suspended in that basket. All of us come to that moment at some time in our life, though many of us would rather die than show it.

There is a story of Roland, an officer in Charlemagne's army. Roland was in charge of the rearguard of the army. Suddenly his company was ambushed. The battle raged fiercely against terrible odds. The situation was not completely hopeless, however. Roland had a horn whose blast could be heard thirty miles away. Oliver, his friend besought him to blow the horn so that Charlemagne would hear and come back to help. But Roland was too proud to ask for help. One by one his men fell fighting till only he was left. Then at last with his dying breath he blew the horn, and Charlemagne rushed to his aid. But it was too late, for Roland was dead, because he was too proud to ask for help.

The things we keep in shadows, afraid of ridicule, admitting weakness, afraid to admit we need help.

Despite his phenomenal success in swimming, Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian in history, encountered profound internal struggles outside the pool. He battled anxiety and depression, which escalated after the 2012 Olympics. His mental health issues reached a point where he contemplated suicide.

For a long time, Phelps avoided acknowledging the depth of his emotional turmoil. He hesitated, afraid of the stigma, after all, he is Michael Phelps, 23 gold and 28 overall. Eventually, he overcame that pride and sought professional help. He engaged in therapy and openly shared his journey with the world through interviews and advocacy work. He has since encouraged countless others to break through the stigma.

It is really sad and unhealthy to bottle up our pain.There are times when all of us reach the breaking point. At such times we desperately need a friend. That is one reason a church family is so important. For many of us this is where we turn with our hurts.

Our relationship with God is also critical to the healing process,however. One psychotherapist has concluded that the major factor in the effect of treatment on an emotionally disturbed patient is the therapist's expectation. According to this study the therapist can literally communicate a winning or losing feeling with the patient almost unobtrusively. For example the therapist might say: "You're the kind of person who can pull yourself out of depression. You can get yourself out of the house, join a social organization, get out to meet people, I believe in you." Compare that to this: "You're now too fragile to go out on your own."

Isn't it good to know that there is One who always believes in us? Who says to us, "You are created in my image. You can make it. I will be with you." Good religion heals the body. Good religion heals the emotions.

**GOOD RELIGION HEALS THE SOUL.** By the soul we mean "the whole person." Who we really are inside. Not what other people see. Not a tiny fragment of our being, but the totality of our being. Our personality, our dreams, our fears. When we understand who we are under God when we surrender ourselves to his love and trust in his providence there is healing.

Such a healing took place in the life of actress Betty Hutton. This is an old story but one I love. One night Miss Hutton joined the cast of the Broadway production of the musical ANNIE in New York City. Immediately prior to this time Miss Hutton had experienced a spiritual awakening and was making a comeback after many years of failure, family breakdown, bankruptcy and a bout with alcoholism.

The program notes for ANNIE that night at the Alvin Theatre contained extensive biographical sketches about members of the cast. All except Betty Hutton. Her biography consisted of five words, but those words spoke to everyone in the audience. And when Betty finally appeared on stage, the theatre burst into joyful applause. No one minded that the production was held up for several minutes as she stood in the spotlight, eyes glistening with tears. What were the five words Betty Hutton had written? "I'm back. THANKS TO GOD." (2)

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum when a man in the grip of an evil spirit began shouting at him. We don't know the nature of that evil spirit, but we know that Jesus delivered the man. We don't know whether that man had a family but in our imagination, we can see him returning home in his right mind with a serene look on his face. His wife greets him at the door. His children peer suspiciously from behind their mother's skirt. He gently calls them out and lifts them into his arms. He turns to his wife and says softly, "I'm back. THANKS TO GOD."

Good religion heals the body. Good religion heals the emotions. Most important of all, good religion heals the soul.
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(1) Larry Parker, WE LET OUR SON DIE (Harvest House, 1980)

(2) Barbara Hudson Dudley in DAILY GUIDEPOSTS, 1982 (Carmel, New York: Guideposts, 1981)

2

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. Southeners 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.

3

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.

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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.