

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

First Day on the Job

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The last couple weeks we have listened to Jesus calling of his own companions. For as I mentioned last Sunday, Jesus does not want to be a lone prophet, he wants to have others around him, He needed to have others around him, close friends to support him and keep him going. Today and next week we hear from the Gospel of Mark stories from the first days of Jesus ministry; stories, you could say, from Jesus first day's on the job. And today's incident gives us some appreciation for why Jesus did not want to operate alone, but needed companions with him.

For Jesus no sooner embarks on his first preaching in the synagogue than he is confronted by a demon who tries to derail him. Doesn't this sound familiar? How often have we felt called, inspired to follow God's will only to find ourselves immediately beset by demons, whether it be an external obstacle or more often, at least for me, some inner demon of my own design, who would sabotage my freshly made resolutions and like King Herod, seek to kill the new-born promise of conversion and true peace.

It is important to remember, that, as in today's Gospel, the power of the demons is fed by fear. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? We know who you are." Our demons too feed off our fears, fear of change and its cost, fear of failure and the shame that follows in its train.

How battle the demons? How fight fear? Through love. For fear focuses us on ourselves, on the threats and dangers to our own security. Love turns our attention outward, away from ourselves, towards our neighbor, towards our goal. As John says, love banishes all fear. In today's gospel it is the love of God, made radiant in the person of Jesus, who rebukes the demon and commands him to shut

up and get out, to leave his victim in peace. It is through his divine love that Jesus can see through the ranting man's unclean spirit of anger and rage to the fearful soul shaking in terror beneath the bravado. It is through his divine love that Jesus can exorcize this man's demon and restore his peace of mind.

We all need God's love. If we are to exorcize the demons that would hold us captive, we need all kinds of love and on both ends, both the receiving and the giving ends of love. Like Jesus, we too need companions for our journey, to guide and to support us, to lift our spirits when they flag, to spy the demons lurking about that we may have become blind to, that we may be beginning to identify with.

Given our need for love, it is important not to misunderstand our reading today from Paul. You kids especially, with your lives before you, don't get Paul wrong today. He is not saying marriage is for slackers! Well, ok, he is kind of saying marriage is for slackers. But he has a reason for saying this. He thought the world was about to end. In his mind there was no time for ordinary life. We should live with our bags packed, ready to go at a moment's notice. And while there remains some truth in this, for who knows the day or the hour of their own departure, we do have to continue to live our lives in the interim. And if we are to hope to keep our demons at bay, we are going to need love in our lives—we are going to need to give love and to receive it. Now Paul himself gave and received love through his apostolic ministry, through the churches he planted, through the companions he recruited. But as Paul himself acknowledges later in the same letter, while there is one spirit, there are many gifts, and people are called in many different ways.

Since Vatican II there has been a renewed appreciation of married life as a religious calling, a vocation in its own right, to minister to the cares of this world. Our faith cannot simply be focused on the world to come. Our faith, if it is to be vital, must infuse even this world, infuse it with God's love and build it into his kingdom. And if it is true that it is love that defeats our demons, then the married love of husband and wife, parents and children can indeed be a source and a

resource for liberation.... and salvation.

Love of God and love of man (or woman), these should not be in conflict. They do not make for a zero sum game, but each enriches the other, indeed each makes the other possible. I may not be married but I would not be here without the love of my parents. When Jesus is later asked what is God's greatest commandment he will give the same answer Moses gives in Deuteronomy: love God and love your neighbor--two sides of the same coin. For as John will ask "how can you love God whom you cannot see, if you do not love your neighbor standing right before you?"

And perhaps here lies the reason for Paul's hesitancy in offering his advice. For while he knows that he is called to the single life of an apostle, he also knows that he still depends on the love of others, the churches he has planted, the companions he has recruited, and he also knows that not all are called by God in the same way. And so having spoken his mind, he hastens to add that married or celibate what matters in the end is to do what will help us devote ourselves to the Lord..

We all have demons to be exorcized. May we not let them undermine who we are and what we are called to become. Married or not, may we find the love we need to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord.