

WRESTLING WITH DEMONS

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The Psalmist prayed: *Be not far away, O Lord; you are my strength, hasten to help me. Save me from the lion's mouth, my wretched body from the horns of wild bulls. (Psalm 22:18, 20)*

From time to time I have shared with you in sermons how I worked in mental health before becoming a priest. The first hospital to hire me held an orientation session that included an explanation of the codes we would hear over the loudspeaker. The goal of the codes, apparently, was to communicate the situation and the plan without alarming the patients. For example, "Code Blue, 2 West" meant that someone on the 2nd floor of the west building was in cardiac arrest, and whoever was on duty for such an emergency should report there immediately. "Code Blaze, 3 East" meant that there was a fire on the third floor of the east building. Frankly, Code Blaze did not strike me as a terribly tricky code. Any patient could have figured it out and gone into panic. Finally, "Code Man, 4 North" meant that someone on the 4th floor of the north building was out of control, and every able-bodied man should rush there to help restore order through sheer force of numbers. 4-North, by the way, was where I worked. It was the locked unit of the acute psychiatric ward, and it was a safe bet that if a code-man were called, 4-North would be the location.

I will never forget a recurring patient whose name was Tom. Tom was an enormous guy with a body built for the sumo wrestling ring. He suffered from bipolar disorder, and in his manic phases became a frequent cause for code man alerts. Tom would become intensely irritable, refuse his medications, begin shouting, disrobing, even throwing tables and chairs across the room. Other patients would retreat to safety, and with the arriving manpower we would have to subdue Tom and wrestle him into a seclusion room. The seclusion room had padded, concrete walls and only a small, plexi-glass window in the reinforced door. Anyone in seclusion required constant observation. I recall watching Tom screaming at the top of his voice, and hurling his naked body at the door with every bit of force he could muster: again, and again, and again. The place would shudder under the power of his blows, as did everyone who witnessed the intensity of what his illness drove him to do. Tom suffered much, as did his family.

This week as I read the Gospel passage from Luke (8:26-39) appointed for today I remembered Tom and the many code-man alerts that he caused. Luke reports how Jesus crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, into the country of the Gerasenes, which was Gentile territory. As they stepped out of the boat they immediately encountered a man whom Luke describes as having demons. He wore no clothes and lived in a nearby cemetery among the tombs. He began shouting with a loud voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!" Apparently, this fellow had been the cause of many code-man alerts in the community. We've heard how when his demon would seize him he was kept under guard and bound with chains and fetters. But such was his strength that he broke the bonds and was driven back to living among the tombs. Clearly, the man suffered much, as did his family.

Today we would not describe a person with such symptoms as being possessed by demons. He would likely receive a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, and be treated with modern medications under the care of a psychiatrist. Nevertheless, a clinical diagnosis should not minimize the spiritual reality of what the man was enduring. Tom knew well that he had bipolar disorder. He also described himself as having demons. Sometimes a purely clinical explanation is insufficient in describing the full reality. We are more than medical beings. We are also psychological and

spiritual beings. So Tom talked about how he wrestled with his demons. Likewise, when Jesus asked the man his name he replied, "Legion," for it seemed to the man that an entire legion of demons had entered him, and were driving him to behave the way he did.

We know that Jesus, somehow, brought peace of mind to the man. Luke describes the strange scene with the herd of swine. When Jesus ordered the demons out of the man, they begged him not to send them to the abyss, which would have been their annihilation, but to allow them instead to enter the swine. Jesus gave them permission, the swine rushed down a hillside into the lake, and were drowned. Did demons actually enter the swine? Some commentators offer the plausible explanation that the man's shouting startled the swine, and they rushed in panic down the hillside. Jesus then seized on the scene as a real-time illustration for the man that the demons were leaving him. However it happened, when the community came out to see what had occurred, they found the man sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. Luke offers the scene as a picture of salvation: a man restored to the image of who God intended him to be, free of the demons that tormented him. What Luke wants us to see and dare to believe is that Jesus is stronger than all the forces that would separate us from God. No disease of the mind, no wasting ailment of the body, not even death itself can sever us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Psalmist prayed: *Be not far away, O Lord; you are my strength, hasten to help me. Save me from the lion's mouth, my wretched body from the horns of wild bulls.* So might the prayer go up from the people of Orlando, where this week the spiritual forces of wickedness have given the love of God and the power of goodness a run for the money. It began a week ago last Friday, when the pop singer Christina Grimmie had finished performing a concert at The Plaza Live in Orlando. As she was signing autographs for her fans a 27-year old man whom she did not know appeared out of nowhere and shot her. Grimmie's brother wrestled the man to the ground, but the gunman then shot and killed himself. Sadly, Grimmie died from her wounds the next day. Authorities are still trying to figure out what motivated the killer to commit such a senseless, evil deed.

It was hardly 24 hours later when violence erupted again in Orlando, this time on an unthinkable scale. In the wee hours of last Sunday morning, 29-year old Omar Mateen opened fire at Pulse, a crowded gay night club, and held forth for three hours, indiscriminately killing those who were trapped inside. He took time to check social media to see if his deeds were trending. He also called 911 and pledged his allegiance to the Islamist terrorist organization, ISIS. When police finally broke through a wall and killed Mateen, 49 others lay murdered in what has turned out to be the deadliest shooting spree in US history. Was Mateen mentally ill? Probably. Was he possessed by evil? It makes sense to me.

The bad news from Orlando still wasn't finished. On Tuesday evening a vacationing family at Disney World was relaxing by the side of a man-made lagoon outside their hotel. Two-year old Lane Graves was wading in ankle-deep water when suddenly a large alligator appeared out of nowhere and grabbed him in its jaws. Lane's father rushed to his aid and tried to wrestle the child from the alligator, but to no avail. The beast was simply too strong and Lane perished. As a parent myself it's hard to imagine a more horrific scene: a creature from the deep dragging your toddler to his death. Yes, we understand that alligators are natural predators, wired to act by instinct without discriminating what sort of small animal it grabs. This alligator was only doing what alligators do. Again, purely natural explanations are insufficient because we are more than merely natural beings. We are wired to seek meaning in a moral universe. Thus, it's hard not to ascribe evil to an alligator's killing of a child, however natural the alligator may be. "Nature red in tooth and claw" is a sign that we live in a fallen, broken world. Our souls and spirits cry out for another way, a way in which life does not terrorize and feed upon other life. St. Paul would lament

that all of creation is groaning in bondage to decay (Romans 8). And still we pray the Psalmist's prayer: *Be not far away, O Lord; you are my strength, hasten to help me. Save me from the lion's mouth, my wretched body from the horns of wild bulls.*

What sort of help can we expect from the Lord? What do we mean when we sing, "Thine arm, O Lord, in days of old was strong to heal and save?" Obviously – sadly, we might think – God does not extend any sort of divine arm (if one could imagine such a thing) to hold back predators from doing harm. Instead, God sends his Spirit upon the likes of you and me to go forth into the world, and be the body of Christ, to wrestle with demons. We do so not confiding in our own strength, but trusting that Jesus, the man of God's own choosing, is at work in us and through us. In the Incarnation, God responded to a code-man and sent Jesus. God sent his only-begotten Son, to the end that all who believe in him should not perish eternally, but have everlasting life. Then God sent the church, filled with the spirit of Jesus to spread the gospel and establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. The going is slow. The children of light suffer numerous setbacks along the way. Our cry goes up, "how long?" That being said, I believe we can find some helpful gifts of grace in today's Gospel passage that may serve to encourage us.

To receive the first gift we go back to the strange scene with the herd of swine. You will recall that Luke describes how the demons begged Jesus not to annihilate them, but to send them into the swine. Taking the story at face value, I used to wonder why Jesus didn't simply destroy the demons. Then it dawned on me that the demons themselves took care of their own destruction. Evil eventually proves to be its own ruin. Evil regimes, terrorist organizations, hate groups, and all the forces of wickedness that work to corrupt and destroy the creatures of God will not prevail. Easter Day is our assurance. Thus, as we go forth into the world as children of light, to do works of love, any demons we wrestle are a defeated foe. In today's opening hymn Martin Luther put it this way:

*And though this world with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us;
we will not fear for God hath willed
his truth to triumph through us;
the prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure,
one little word shall fell him.*

A second gift of grace to be received in today's Gospel passage is simply the image of the man, seated at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. Here is a picture of restored humanity. God's will and promise is to recover the dignity of human nature, clothe us in Christ, and return us to the right mind that haunts our primal memory. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians (3:23-29): *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.* Paul offers us a word picture of humanity restored to our right mind: the mind of Christ.

I think again of Tom, the psychiatric patient whom I knew years ago. In his calmer moments in the hospital ward, I learned in speaking with him that no one was more grieved by his setbacks than he himself. Tom told me once that his father kept a picture of him in his wallet so that he could carry it with him at all times. The next time his father visited the ward, Tom wanted me to see the picture. It was a school photo of Tom in the years just before mental illness gripped him. There he was, in his right mind, ready to embrace life. It was an image of who Tom was determined to be again, and his father agreed to carry the photo and keep it safe. Tom and his father would not lose sight of the image they were trying to recover. They pledged to each other that they would wrestle with demons.

I don't know whatever became of Tom, but I pray that he found peace of mind. And I pray for us, that we remember this: that God, like Tom's father, carries an image of human nature close to his heart: human nature restored to our right mind, clothed with Christ, all of us one as children of God. And so we pray with the Psalmist: *Be not far away, O Lord; you are our strength, hasten to help us.*

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