

The Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time B

The Possession of Sin

“What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth?” It’s lines like this that make people glad that they no longer live in the 1st century. After all they were superstitious and gullible and thought they had to live with demons. We are glad to live in the 21st century where we don’t have to live with demons. Of course, we don’t have to live with demons because for the most part, we don’t really believe they exist. Right? But then we read this pesky little passage about Jesus and demon possessed man at Capernaum and it makes us uncomfortable. Obviously, Jesus was exorcising something, and the bible unapologetically calls them demons. And if Jesus recognizes and deals with demons why do we deny them? Are not demons the stuff of Hollywood films and fringe religious groups? After all, we have no empirical evidence of their existence. But then we have no empirical evidence of their absence either. Even if polite church people do talk about demons it’s the psychological demons they refer to and not the nasty horned variety which hiss and convulse people making their heads spin around. When we hear people preach about demons they are generally going to steer the topic to whatever hang-ups and “inner-child” issues we have harbored over the years. And then use the scripture as a kind of self-help manual so we can feel better about who we are. And at the end of the day isn’t that what religion *should* be about? Making me feel better about myself? The most successful preachers today write books with titles like “Your best life now”, “Become a better you,” and so on. You would be hard pressed to find a religious best seller with a title like “If you don’t stop sinning you will go to hell.” We don’t like it. And whatever it is we don’t like we dismiss. So, it would be very easy to dismiss this episode of Jesus and his encounter with the man with an unclean spirit.

Perhaps instead we use this passage as an opportunity to talk about how a person can come to be possessed. Not a possession specifically like the one we just heard, but rather the kind of possession that makes us receptive to an unclean spirit. In other words, the kind of possession I want to address today is what happens when sin finds a home in our lives. That means naming sin and calling it out. It is true that people do not want to hear about sin and repentance. They *do* want to hear about grace and forgiveness, although it’s hard to imagine what those words might mean apart from the somber reality of sin. Why are we so reluctant to speak about sin? I am not sure I can answer that question, but I think I can at least identify some of the realities that have made it easier for sin to find a home in our hearts.

The three trends are pluralism, postmodernism, and secularism. I don’t think these are things we can ignore. If we are going to recover a sense of sin and our need for repentance we are going to have to recognize and respond to the challenges of these three isms by entering into dialogue with them. We might think of pluralism as spiritual globalization. With an ever-present media we know more about world religions than ever before. For the first time I have heard Catholics talk about karma as if it were a serious aspect of their life. Zen Buddhism and Yoga offers alternative philosophies that

ultimately place us in the center of everything rather than God. Religious pluralism at its worst says that Christianity or any religion for that matter is a resource to be mined rather than an all-encompassing way of life. The postmodern age is an age of disillusionment with once revered authorities. Disillusioned people respond to this in all sorts of ways. Some abandon the search for meaning altogether, while others hunt for deeper and more reliable sources of it. Some campaign for a return to the values of the past, while others invest themselves in new visions for the future. The common thread is a distrust of the old institutions that have let them down. The results of this are that people are no longer willing to take the church's word on anything. The threat of sin and promise of salvation sound too much like part of an old control mechanism for keeping people in line, which has failed at the highest echelons of church leadership.

For the culture at large, religious language has been replaced by the language of spirituality, which uses gentler words such as empowerment, and harmony, or even stress reduction. I have nothing against these words, but I am not sure they are adequate to describe the darker realms of the human experience, where power is a problem, not an asset, and where harmony is a distant memory from a life that ended a long time ago. The days are long gone when preachers can stand up in pulpits and name people's sins for them. They don't have that authority any more. What they can do, I believe, is to describe the experience of sin and its aftermath so vividly that people can identify its presence in their own lives, not as a chronic source of guilt, but as the part of their individual and corporate lives that is crying out for change.

An article appeared in *Harpers* in which the author Lewis Lapham proposes a merger of the seven cardinal virtues with the seven deadly sins. His argument is that heaven and heaven's values have become redundant to North Americans who have created their own heaven on earth. Virtues do not meet the requirements of the global market, he explains, while sins sustain the stock market, keep unemployment rates low, excite speculation, and satisfy the public appetite for sexual and political intrigue. "Trim the fat of the seven virtues," he says, "And nothing bad happens to the price of real estate or the Dow Jones Industrial Average; take away the seven deadly sins, and the country goes promptly broke." His satirical solution is to downsize the virtues by recognizing the practical virtues of sin. Pride moves people to endow scholarship funds and professorial chairs, he points out, while anger and lust fuel the entertainment industry. But I believe the culture has already devised its own solution by downsizing the number of things we call sin. Much that is sinful is no longer considered sinful by large segments of the population. What used to be called self-discipline is now called repressive behavior. What used to be called living in sin is now called a meaningful relationship. Sex is so routine before marriage that to be otherwise is considered odd and even abnormal. We call lying "spin" and greed "motivation." What is to be gained by condemning such things when people are going to do them anyway? Why not respect the individual's freedom to choose, since it is the individual who will bear the consequence? Most people who have succumbed to the possession of sin are for the most part adept at keeping it to themselves. And while they appear to lead normal lives they are usually desperately lonely because sin isolates us. When, however, the demons that inhabit a sin infested soul decide to unleash their demonic behavior on the world around them, the words of Paul in Romans 6 come alive,

“the wages of sin is death...” “I don’t understand why he did what he did...he seemed so normal.” “Well, he was a loner...” And then there is the replacement of the language of sin and salvation with the language of medicine and law.

When Karl Menninger wrote his 1973 bestseller *Whatever Became of Sin?* He cast sin in secular terms and saw it as a failure of the moral ideal.

“Yes, your honor, I see the picture, and I know that’s me, but I don’t remember being there that night. I had just come off a double shift, I was on pain meds, and I should have never started drinking on top of those pills...”

The truth in statements such as these is that none of us acts in a vacuum. Our lives are fundamentally linked with all other lives. Our choices are limited by other people’s choices, as well as by many factors beyond our control. We “find ourselves striking out, breaking things, saying things.” The consequences of our actions are the same whether we meant to or not, but to admit that we are responsible may not match how we felt at that time which is why we prefer to shift responsibility. “The devil made me do it” rings with more truth than most are willing to accept.

In the old movie *Charade*, when Audrey Hepburn turns to Cary Grant and asks him, “Why do people lie?” “People lie,” he says, because they want something and fear that the truth will not get it for them.” If instead it was sin she was asking about, he might have said instead, “People sin because they want something and fear that goodness will not get it for them.” This fear, this human weakness, is so common among us we might as well call it the possession of sin. If we are to reclaim a sense of sinfulness in our lives, if we are to stop lying to ourselves and say with St. John; “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves...” We have to realize we cannot do it by ourselves.

That poor man with the unclean spirit needed Jesus to free him from the imprisonment of his possession. Recognizing our own sinfulness begins with recognizing that we need to invite Jesus Christ into our daily lives. We need to bring him all the way into the darkest corners of our lives so that he can rid us of the domination of the effects of sin. Are there any demons in your life?

Lent is around the corner. We have a choice to make as to what Lent will mean for us this year. Let us ask our Lord to rebuke that which holds us down and holds us back, that lies to us and makes us lie to ourselves.

-by Fr. Larry Covington