

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

It's been more than a year now since a visitor to St. Francis came to our 10:30 service one Sunday morning with a book called *The Rite of Exorcism*. When he left it in his pew near the back of the church as he went to speak with someone he knew, the book seemed to jump up and say "look at me." Most who saw it were caught off guard and quite alarmed! I was not surprised, because in my first conversation with that man more than a year earlier, he had asked me if I would teach him how to perform exorcisms. I realized pretty quickly that this man was on a mission to cure the world of the evils he believed to be present—namely anyone who disagreed with him. I doubt that he ever considered he might be one of them.

When I read a story like today's gospel lesson, my first responsibility is to understand how we as Christians who live in a time that has been called the "post-Christian era" can relate to what we read and hear from that particular scripture, and how we, as Christians, can use what we're taught to bring Christ back into the world in which we live. I looked up "demon" and found three definitions: an evil spirit; a person who has a lot of energy or enthusiasm; something that causes a person to have a lot of trouble or unhappiness. For today's purposes, let's throw out the middle definition and address the other two.

First, we have to consider whether or not we believe there are evil spirits in our world. Although we're taught that evil is real, in our naiveté we might not be so sure. But if we do believe it, then we should already know the answer to the question the demon asked Jesus: "what have you to do with me, Jesus?" Then we're called to take a step toward the question and consider that it is also for us: what have you to do with me, Christian? It's really easy to hear these stories of Jesus exorcising demons and consider them as only another sign of the power of God working through the incarnate Christ. We get that, I hope. So what, then, is the Spirit calling us to learn from the story? Today, I think we should focus on the third definition of a demon: something that causes a person to have a lot of trouble or unhappiness.

Surely we've all had times in our lives, maybe in the whole of our lives when our joy for living has been overshadowed by something that has caused us trouble or unhappiness. We would like to believe that our "personal" demons don't affect the people around us, but that's simply not the case. If we ignore our demons—whatever they are—and the way they control our lives, we also ignore our contribution to the common good, whether the common good is shared with our family, our friends, our church, our towns, our country or our world. As we'll be reminded when we gather on July 7 to watch the documentary "I Am," we are all connected to each other and everything we do affects others.

We see that in the way the Gerasenian demoniac's life affected those in his community. He lived away from town, in the tombs. Had he been sent there by those who sought order, or wanted to protect their families, or by those he made uncomfortable by disrupting the peacefulness of their lives and weighing on their consciences? We have no way of knowing that, or of knowing whether anything could be done for him short of the power of Jesus; but we can imagine that it was considered better for everyone to have him out there on the fringes where he wouldn't be seen or heard than to have been in the middle of town where he would be a constant reminder that we *are* our brother's keeper.

That's what we do with things we don't understand or don't want to be involved with, isn't it—put them out of sight, out of mind? One of our societal demons—those things that cause us problems

or unhappiness as a society—is to put them away so that we don't have to think about them, much less become involved and do something about them. And if putting those things—and people—away doesn't resolve our discomfort or our fear, we move on to the next action. Our discomfort becomes scorn and contempt, our fear becomes hatred, our hatred becomes violence, and protecting ourselves becomes our most important priority, even when we come together to worship. Funny, but I thought we put our trust in God to protect us! I wonder what Jesus would have to say about the way we live today. I suspect he would ask us if we think his lessons about love and tolerance and forgiveness and compassion apply only to those we care about and agree with and look like and act like.

A week ago we awoke to the news of still another mass shooting in our country. In a time when we are already divided over ideology and theology, about how we are to live together, about who is right and who is wrong, each side has hunkered down, once again, to guard their own opinions and beliefs. All of us are so sure we're right that we aren't willing even to engage in civilized conversation about how to solve our problems and stop our self-destruction. For us as Christians, the issue isn't who's right or who's wrong, or about liberal or conservative or Republican or Democrat, or for or against guns or Muslims or gays or even flying purple people-eaters. The rhetoric and self-interest that consumes us is getting us nowhere. It's time we returned to the only ideology and theology that should matter to any of us, and that is what we've been taught by our Lord Jesus Christ. I don't mean the Jesus Christ we've conformed to our own opinions and beliefs, but the one who taught us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, souls and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves—the one for whom “neighbor” means everyone.

William Parker writes about a traveling businessman who noticed the passenger seated next to him on a plane was reading the Bible. The two men began talking and the businessman asked his seatmate which translation of the Bible he preferred. The man said he read the King James Version because the lofty phrasing helped him feel closer to God. The businessman replied that he preferred his grandmother's translation. His seatmate, familiar with many Bible translations, had never heard of a version translated by a grandmother, so he asked about it. The businessman replied, “Oh, her work was never put in writing; she translated the Bible into action every day of her life.”¹

That is the way we keep the demons at bay—both the personal ones and the societal ones—by living our lives in Christian action that proclaims the Lord of our lives. With Jesus in our hearts and on our lips, the demons dare not stay around. Jesus has the power to release the captives, to bring power to those who are powerless, to restore the earth and those who live on it to the condition God intended when God created it. Through Jesus, the earth can be exorcised of its demons. Through him, *WE are* the exorcists. We don't need a special book to tell us how.

When Elijah arrived at Mount Horeb, God says to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” “I alone am left,” Elijah responds. We are not alone. Jesus is with us. And he's asking *us*, “what are you doing here?”

Please turn to page 833 in the Book of Common Prayer and pray with me the prayer attributed to our patron, St. Francis.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

¹ Synthesis, Proper 7, Year C, June, 2010.