

Epiphany 4
January 28, 2018
Christ the King
Kenner

Deep Down Inside

Text: Mark 1:21-28

This was the first miracle of Jesus recorded by St. Mark. And it's a dramatic one, an exorcism, the casting out of an evil spirit.

I know what you're probably thinking. "An exorcism, really?" And that's what I used to think until I experienced one.

I've learned lately that people seem to appreciate what are called narrative sermons, in which I begin with an example from my own experiences. Well, this one is a doozie.

A parishioner (I never identify which parish or use the person's real name), a parishioner named "Connie" called me at about 4:00 in the morning, asking if I could come over to the house. She told me over the phone that her son, Robert" was behaving very strangely. Connie's husband had died just about a year earlier, and her son, in his mid to late 20s was living at home.

When I arrived, she met me at the door and led me to Robert's room, saying, "I don't know what's wrong with him."

When I entered I saw Robert sitting in front of a few candles, almost trance-like. He had painted crosses in red on each of the bedroom walls. I felt a need to get him out of the room so I suggested we take a walk. It was about 5:00 in the morning and it was just starting to get light. Connie gave us each a mug of coffee and Robert and I went outside. I noticed that he was holding his mug down to his side, and he seemed unable to lift it up to his lips. When I asked if

he wanted to talk, he dropped to his knees and spoke in an eerie deep voice, and began to talk about himself in the third person, saying, "Robert has been very bad." I realized that he wanted to make a confession, but that's all he kept repeating. "Robert has been bad."

He was very agitated, and so weighted down with guilt that he couldn't even stand up without my help. He was obviously worried. And despite my efforts to allay his fears, seemed more and more anxious. So I asked if he would feel safer at the hospital. "Yes," he said. So off I drove him to the hospital where I admitted him to the psychiatric ward. He continued speaking to me in the third person about himself, with that same eerie, deep voice.

I only had to wait a few minutes before the doctor came out and said I could see him now, that he had given Robert a shot and wanted to keep him for a few days. And when I went into his room, sure enough, the strange deep voice was gone, Robert was responsive and himself again. The evil spirit was gone. An exorcism had occurred, with the aid of a hypodermic needle.

There's obviously a lot more to the story. To sum it up, the demons kept returning, but Robert finally confided in me that he was gay (although I'm not sure the word "gay" was even used back then). One evening Connie called to say Robert was acting strangely again; I went to the house and invited Robert to take another walk with me. He told me he was afraid. When I asked what he was most fearful of, he said it would be of his mother ever finding out his secret. He said he'd never be able to tell her.

That's when I asked if I had his permission to tell her. When he said yes, I told him "wait here," and I returned to the house to tell Connie what had been bothering Robert so much. As soon as I told her she ran out to her son, threw her arms around him and said, "Oh, Robert, I'll always love you."

And that's when the real exorcism occurred. Robert was fine from that point on. Almost like Jesus, his mother had the ability, the authority to free him from his fear. She did it the way most healings occur these days, through the power of love.

Whom might you be able to free? Who needs an emotional healing?

I'm not saying that we can forego the expertise of medical and psychological professionals. But I am saying that there are many people, probably some of them in each of our lives who harbor hurt and fear deep down inside.

And maybe the most we can do is point them in the right direction for help, or listen to them and encourage them to deal with their demons. And sometimes we can do even more than that; we can love them while giving them at the same time assurances of God's love also. Do you know someone who needs those assurances?

Well, we all need them, don't we. We all need to know that we're not alone, not adrift in the world, but have a connection to others who care about us and most certainly to God whose love is everlasting.

And it's powerful! It can change people. When Jesus taught, the crowds were amazed because he taught with authority. It connected with people and still does.

I feel a need to apologize for this weekend's bulletin cover. I didn't chose it and I'm no art critic, but does that look like the Lord teaching with authority? Maybe. But to me he looks soft. It reminds me of a quote of Friedrich Nietzsche: "Oh, pale Galilean, the world has grown grey from your stale breath." Or something like that.

Something really fascinating about today's Gospel is that while the people are all in a quandary, wondering who this Jesus is and asking each other, "who is this?", the unclean spirit knows exactly who Jesus is and cries out "I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24). Throughout the Gospels, the demons understand what only seems to puzzle the humans.

Jesus is turning the world upside-down. And the powers that be don't like it. As the leaders of the people sing about Jesus in the rock-opera Superstar, which will be televised on Easter Sunday, "he is dangerous." But we know better.

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By the way, I began talking about exorcism, but in every service of baptism there is what has been called "the little exorcism." Three questions are asked of the person being baptized, or, in the case of a baby, the godparents: I'm sure you've heard them dozens of times.

1. Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? I renounce them
2. Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?
3. Finally, do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?

That part of the baptism is called "the little exorcism."