

OPENING:

A story from a female Lutheran pastor about demons

This pastor was out on a date with somebody, let's say the 3rd date.

And the topic finally came up to why she, the pastor, was a Christian and went to church every week

The question came (from the eventual ex-boyfriend) out of a place of curiosity and kindness. But the pastor, for whatever reason, thought about it for a moment, and answered in this way:

“I don't know why I go to church... I guess the power of Christ compels me.”¹

A story from my own life about demons:

I was going through a tough time in my life, struggling with anxiety and depression. My response to it was never paralysis or staying in bed, which I know is common. I had to try everything: diet, exercise, you name it, anything to fix what was wrong with me.

One of the many things that I tried was to call people and talk about how I could not sleep and my mind could not rest.

It was interesting who I called:

like Jesus, my family could only provide so much help

(not because they did not love me but because they were too close)

nor could religious professionals,

(because I was suspicious of them, because I was one.)

So I called friends, one in particular, named Jimmy who we know from our time in New Orleans and from the Episcopal Church that we attended there.

Jimmy is actually from Shreveport and if you know anything about Louisiana geography and sociology, that's basically Texas.

Jimmy did not disappoint, listening deeply to my problems, sharing his own experiences, and also giving me some of that “old-time religion” that is common to the Bible Belt, and less common in our tradition.

He said some things that trended a little more conservative than I was comfortable with, but he was incredibly helpful because in so doing he respected the demons that I was up against.

¹ This is the famous quote from *The Exorcist* (1973) when the priest tries to exorcize the demon from the little girl. See [The Power of Christ Compels You - The Exorcist \(4/5\) Movie CLIP \(1973\) HD - YouTube](#).

When we ended one of our conversations, he told me something I will never forget. He said:

“Charles, I will be praying for you, I will be praying for you a lot, because you are a pastor and good person, and so for Satan, you would be a pretty good get.”

I will never forget that. I thought it was funny. A little dramatic. Over the top. But it also a gracious gift in that he was telling me that he was on my side, that what I was experiencing was real and that what I was up against had a name. All of that was strangely comforting.

GOSPEL:

Those are two stories about demons, to go with our Gospel story.

Here we have a story of an “intervention,” in the modern parlance, where Jesus gets a visit from his family, who think he has gone mad, and the religious authorities, who think he has done worse.

Jesus has tough words for both of them.

If you have had experience in your life with mental illness or addiction, and by that I mean everyone in this room, but in particular those who are family members of someone suffering from mental illness, this story might hit you in a little different way:

“(You) will see (yourselves) as the anxious relatives who are waiting outside the crowded house, hoping for a moment alone with (someone you) love.

(You) know what it is like to take part in a therapeutic intervention, to tell a loved one he/she is headed toward disaster if he/she does not enter treatment.

(You know what it’s like) to be told that you are ‘enablers’ and should practice ‘tough love.’

You know how it is to feel guilty for acting (...) and guilty for not acting.

Before we come down too hard on Jesus’ family, we should spend some time standing where they stand.”²

DEMONS:

I don’t need to tell you that Jesus and his family lived in a world which had a different understanding of spirits and demons, and the like. In their world, it was commonplace to think often about such forces because they lived in a world where so much seemed out of their control.

I don’t need to tell you that we don’t live in that world. In our world, there is little

² Brant S. Copeland, “Pastoral Perspective” (Mark 3.19b-30) in 2014. *Feasting on the Gospel (Mark)* edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis, and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Louisville; Westminster John Knox, 98,100

space for such forces because we live in a world where we think everything is under our control.

In my first story, the Lutheran pastor had tough words for her date.

What she meant by what she said to the guy on the 3rd date, which she later admitted was a dumb joke, was that she did not choose to be a Christian. That Jesus chose her over and over again. She was telling him that there are forces at work that are out there, that are out of her control, and those forces were so powerful that, like C.S. Lewis and his conversion from atheism to Christianity: "she was dragged kicking and screaming into the kingdom of God."³

The Lutheran pastor explained it this way:

in the 1st century, to claim that Jesus was Lord was to claim that Caesar was not.
in the 21st century, to claim that Jesus is Lord is to claim that **I** am not, that
"There is a savior, and it blessedly is not me."⁴

In my example, my story, I would say the same thing: that there are things that we do not understand, that are much larger than ourselves.

We shy away from talk of "possession" in the pulpit/ church but that's what it feels like, I suppose, to be depressed. Depressives are possessed by what Jesus calls (inelegantly) "the Strong Man."

There are no stained glass depictions of Jesus breaking into the Strong Man's house and tying him up but maybe there should be.⁵

It would be of great solace to see a muscular and determined Jesus, forcing his way into one's home, binding the evil forces that exist there.

If you are suffering from anxiety or depression or addiction or loneliness, which is again most of us, that would be a gift to behold Jesus in that way.

Michael Gerson, the late *Washington Post* columnist who suffered from depression, once gave a powerful sermon at the Washington National Cathedral, one that has had a profound influence on my life, the sermon was given shortly after his hospitalization.

He talked about the demons that he faced, the ones that told him that "Everyone hates him" that "you have no future" that "no one would miss you" and "you are burden to your friends."

³ Elizabeth Callen (5.9.2024) "Infinite Grace" *Mockingbird* [Infinite Grace - Mockingbird \(mbird.com\)](https://mbird.com)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thomas H. Troeger, "Homiletical Perspective" (Mark 3.19b-30) in 2014. *Feasting on the Gospel (Mark)* edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis, and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Louisville; Westminster John Knox, 101.

But then he talked about how: “there are friends who run into the burning building of your life to rescue you, and acquaintances who become friends.”

People like Jimmy in my life.

How in his case: “You meet other patients, from entirely different backgrounds, who share your symptoms, creating a community of the wounded. And you learn of the valor they show in lonely rooms.

“the valor they show in lonely rooms.”⁶

These are the strong men (and women) who fight back against the Strong Man, who tie the demons up fearlessly.

This is not cinematic, or a magic formula like the movie *The Exorcist*.

It comes about by listening, by talking, by the work of trained professionals, by AA groups, by a whole army that might assemble and fight back.

I would throw everything you cannot at it, it’s a nuclear arms race, and there is no such thing as deterrence.

I would change your diet, and exercise more, and see a therapist, and try medication, write in a journal, I would even come to church,

I would try one of the many Support groups, AA, and NA, Debt Support groups, Al-Anon.

Then I would call everyone you know and tell them that you need help.

CONCLUSION

The Scribes and even Jesus’ family thought Jesus to be “deranged,” “out of his mind,” “beside himself.”

Of course, the shoe was on the other foot.

They were there to prosecute him but he turned the tables.

Gerson writes that:

Those who hold to the wild hope of a living God can say certain things:

In our right minds – as our most sane and solid selves – we know that the appearance of a universe ruled by cruel chaos is an lie and that the cold void is actually a sheltering sky.

In our right minds, we know that life is not a farce but a pilgrimage – or maybe a farce and a pilgrimage, depending on the day.

In our right minds, we know that hope can grow within us – like a seed, like a child.

In our right minds, we know that transcendence sparks and crackles around us – in a blinding light, and a child’s voice, and fire, and tears, and a warmed heart...

⁶ [Read Michael Gerson’s sermon sharing his struggle with depression | PBS NewsHour](#)

Fate may do what it wants. But this much is settled. In our right minds, we know that love is at the heart of all things.

Many, understandably, pray for a strength they do not possess. But God's promise is somewhat different: That even when strength fails, there is perseverance. And even when perseverance fails, there is hope. And even when hope fails, there is love. And love never fails.

AMEN