

Save Me

I have had the good fortune over these many years to work with folks who struggled with demons.

Those demons have many names and faces.

They include demons born of all kinds of active childhood abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse.

They include demons born of passive abuse: abandoned children or children left far too young to fend for themselves.

The demons include alcohol and drug abuse; feelings of unworthiness and sometimes bouts of uncontrolled anger: sometimes directed outward; oftentimes directed inward.

What I discovered along the way is that in order to be of any use to someone struggling with their own demons, I need to continually face my own.

The fact is, we are each of us, in one way or another, beset with demons, and we are very often quite reluctant to confront them, and often reluctant to let them go.

People sometimes hold tight to their demons because they seem to provide protection against a harsh world.

The protection provided by drugs and alcohol is probably the most obvious: these substances take the edge off of brittle emotions, frightening memories and seemingly bottomless emptiness.

But it is the other demons, the ones not so easily exposed to the world, that today's readings call us to explore, to examine, and to offer up to God.

As Fred Beuchner puts it:

"You repress the memory that is too painful to deal with, say.

You deny your weight problem.

You sublimate some of your sexual energy by channeling it into other forms of activity more socially acceptable.

You conceal your sense of inadequacy behind a defensive bravado.

The inner state you end up with is something like a fortress, with an innermost jail cell, enclosed by an inner wall, enclosed by an outer wall, surrounded by a moat, which you erect originally to keep the enemy out but which turns into a prison where you become the jailer and thus your own enemy.

It is a wretched and lonely place.

You can't be what you want to be there nor do what you want to do.

People can't see through all that masonry to who you truly are, and half the time you're not sure you can see who you truly are yourself, you've been walled up so long." (paraphrase).

I think that's some of what's going on in our readings today.

We start with the slave girl who can tell fortunes.

We love people like that!

Who here hasn't heard of, or been to see, Lan, the Kaimuki gal who makes a bloody fortune telling fortunes to folks!

We eat that stuff up.

That's who Paul is up against today.

Paul gets rid of the demon that gives her this gift.

Why is it called a demon you ask?

Why don't we look at fortune telling as a gift from God?

Well, look where it gets this gal: she's enslaved by men using her for profit.

But there's more.

What fortune telling offers is a kind of false assurance about what's coming next in life rather than faithfully trusting in the loving God in whom there is no past or future.

For God, and for those who live in God, all is present, all is now.

Paul abruptly frees this girl and is quickly brought up on charges.

There's no surprise in that.

When the church starts questioning how people make money, the church is quickly labeled subversive, an enemy of the State.

That was the case then, and in those rare moments when the church musters the courage to question our inequitable economic system today, the same accusations are made.

Perhaps you noticed how Paul is not so nice to the young girl who is freed from her demon.

He allows her for days to trail behind them shouting out their true identity as servants of God; and when it finally becomes annoying, he just gets rid of the demon.

There's no pat on the girl's head, no kind words expressed to her.

I read a letter to the editor to a religious magazine this week.

The letter was referring to the story in Matthew's gospel about the pagan woman who pleads with Jesus to free her daughter from an illness.

You know the story,

Jesus tells the pagan lady that it's not right to feed the dogs (meaning her) when the children (meaning the people of Israel) are still hungry.

Well, this letter writer is certain that Matthew has the story all wrong, or that somewhere along the line, someone messed up the translation.

That letter writer is certain of this because his image of Jesus is as a nice man, and a nice man would never say such a thing.

But Jesus is not a nice man, and Paul knows that.

Paul's not nice either.

And both Paul and Jesus know that God is not nice either.

God is good, that is for certain, but not nice.

Nice looks the other way when trouble is brewing.

Nice ignores the demons, hoping they'll simply disappear on their own.

Nice does its best to sooth ruffled feathers.

But the One who is good confronts the demons, deals with the trouble, draws the pus out of the wounds that fester in you and I.

Such is the work of the good God in our world.

So off to jail they go, yet, as the story unfolds, it isn't Paul and Silas who are imprisoned after all, no, the one who is really imprisoned is the chief guard.

Even though he holds the keys to the jail, it is the chief jailer who is about to commit hari-kari.

So he pleads: "What must I do to be saved?!"

He's not asking, I bet, about spiritual salvation or religious salvation.

My guess is he's asking how to be saved from getting fired, or executed.

It's a question that all of us demon-possessed folks ask from time to time.

How can I be saved from what seems to be bouts of uncontrolled anger?

How can I be saved from, say, my love of porn?

How can I be saved from my need to put out the brave and "got it together" front when inside my life seems to be slipping away?

Paul gives the jailer the answer; but unless you sit with the answer for a while, unless you dig deep into the answer, you may hear this answer as so much pious gibberish.

You heard the answer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ."

And when you heard it, maybe you thought: "uh huh, more religious gibberish."

But if we scrape our way through nearly 2000 years of spider webs and dust and misunderstanding to get back to what Paul is actually saying, perhaps we'll get a sense of where we are to go.

Our evangelical friends have made "believe in Jesus" into something like a Boy Scout oath: just say the words and all will be well.

Perhaps that's not what Paul is getting at.

Perhaps Paul is inviting the jailed jailer to see Reality with a new pair of eyes; to hear what is Truth with a new set of ears.

To "believe in Jesus" isn't a Boy Scout oath and it isn't a cure all to our personal demons, it isn't a solution to all that troubles us.

To "believe in Jesus" means coming to see that our small lives are swept up in the grand movement of God, through Jesus; that God is, whether we believe it or not, making all things new and, whether we believe it or not, God is taking humanity by its collective hand to a place where everyone is welcome, where every thirst is quenched with free living water, where the only ticket needed for entry is the ticket that says "help me, Lord."

Our demons fracture us.

They keep us divided within ourselves and in our relationships with others.

When we "believe in Jesus," we stand with the jailer and say, quite simply, "help me."

Quoting Beuchner again:

“It's not always easy to say--you have your pride after all, and you're not sure there's anybody you trust enough to say it to--but it's always worth saying.

To another human being--a friend, a stranger....

To God.

Maybe it comes to the same thing.

Help me.

These words open a door through the walls, and hope is once again, possible.

At long last, you're no longer alone.” Beuchner. (paraphrase)

The invitation of today's gospel is to allow yourself to be grasped by your destiny, and this is your destiny: to become one with God.

It is that unity that our first mother and father broke when they ate the fruit, choosing to decide for themselves what is good and what is evil.

That fracturing occurs again in the pride that leads to the building of the tower of Babel: people not wanting unity with God, but people wanting to be God.

And so today, in our gospel lesson, as we eavesdrop on the heartfelt prayer of Jesus, that we might join him in his glory; that his glory might make us one; we come to the path we each of needs walk if we are to enter that unity.

In John's gospel, the glory of Christ means the cross of Christ.

At the center of every Christian life is the cross.

It is at the cross where we confront our demons.

It is at the cross where we find the ability to love one another, as Jesus loves us.

It is at the cross where we can finally see the truth of who we really are;
and at the cross, come to realize that God accepts us, loves us, heals us, just
as we are.

At the cross there is weakness.

At the cross there is vulnerability.

At the cross, our arms are opened wide.

It's not easy to come to grips with demons.

It takes a willingness to be vulnerable.

It takes a willingness to let go of control.

And it takes a willingness to come face-to-face with memories that we would
rather not remember.

But what is waiting for us if we take this path is neither death nor
desolation.

What waits for me, what waits for you, is resurrection.

+amen

