Overcoming Our Demons

We all have our sports heroes, and mine was Mickey Mantle who played centerfield for the New York Yankees. Mickey Mantle was one of the greatest players in baseball. He was voted the Most Valuable Player of the American League three times, and set numerous records that still stand today. In his career he led the New York Yankees to win more championships than any other team in baseball. As a boy growing up in New York, I would collect and trade baseball cards, but I never traded my Mickey Mantle cards. They were just too valuable.

Great as he was, Mickey Mantle never lived up to his potential. He became addicted to alcohol during his second season in the big leagues. He did such a good job of hiding his problem that his coaches and teammates never suspected that anything was wrong. Long after he retired from baseball, Mantle continued to battle his addiction until he turned sixty-three, when he finally went public with his secret. He went into treatment and gave up booze. Sadly, years of alcohol abuse had destroyed Mickey Mantle’s body. He died a few months later of liver cancer.

It’s a sad story. We see good people addicted to alcohol, addicted to drugs, addicted to all kinds of inappropriate and destructive behavior, and with good reason we ask, “What got into them? Surely they knew better. Why did they let this happen?”

In Jesus’ time they might have answered it this way, “They were possessed by a demon.” In that pre-scientific day, anytime anyone behaved in a manner that was bizarre or destructive, they gave this explanation: “He has a demon.” Mary Magdalene was said to have seven demons (Luke 8:2). This is not unusual in the New Testament. Twelve times in Mark’s Gospel alone, Jesus confronted demons.

We really don’t know what to do with these texts, do we? Liberal Protestant churches do not give much credence to the actual existence of demons, but the Roman Catholic Church continues to sanction exorcism, and every Catholic diocese in the world is supposed to have an exorcist. There is even a chief exorcist at the Vatican. And think of the Pentecostal churches which accept the reality of demonic spirits. According to Philip Jenkins in his book on Third World Christianity, these Pentecostal Churches are growing at a phenomenal rate – over 400 million Pentecostals in the world today – that’s 80% more than all the Anglicans. So demons are still very much a part of many Christians’ beliefs.

In his epistles St. Paul writes about “the principalities and powers” of this world. In the Gospels the reference is more to demons and evil spirits. Maybe to get a better understanding of just what a demon is, we need to move beyond the image of demons as popularized in the movie The Exorcist and begin to think of demons at work in quieter but equally troubling ways.

Remember President Bill Clinton’s acknowledgement in his autobiography of why he got sexually involved with a young White House Intern that almost destroyed his presidency. He said that he struggled with his “demons” – not just the demon of sex but the demon of power. Recall his admission: “I did it because I could.”

There is something in human nature that pulls us beyond our rational selves. Think of all the people who get into trouble because of the stupid things they don’t need to do but do anyway. Wealthy people on Wall Street who are never satisfied with what they have but always need to have more, which often leads them to cross the line between legal and illegal conduct. Bernie Madoff, who masterminded the largest Ponzi scheme in history, is an example of someone who had it all but still wanted more. Or politicians who take bribes and end up in jail – Chicago is full of them – just look at the Governor of Illinois who was impeached and removed from office for trying to sell a Senate seat. Or clergy who steal from the church treasury – several years ago the Episcopal Church in the U.S. had a church treasurer who embezzled hundreds of thousands of dollars before finally being caught. These people don’t need the money but they take the risk and suffer the consequences. Why do they do it? Are they simply being greedy or irresponsible? Are they mentally or emotionally imbalanced? Or is there something demonic at work here?
The same can be said of nations and world leaders. What was it about Hitler, Stalin and Mao that made them so callous to human suffering, so brutal and cruel in their actions that millions perished because of them? In his biography of Harry Truman, David McCullough makes a point of the fact that Stalin was an immensely likable person. Both Truman and Roosevelt liked and trusted the man and thought they could get along with him. Winston Churchill, who was a much better judge of character was wary of Stalin but had to admit to finding him amiable. Joseph Davies, who was at Truman’s side at Potsdam, described Stalin as wise and gentle. “A child would like to sit on his lap and a dog would sidle up to him,” wrote Davies. Even Dwight Eisenhower described Stalin as “benign and fatherly.”

The fact is, however, that Stalin was a mass murderer. He had millions of his own countrymen liquidated – often for only imaginary offenses. He masterminded the political enslavement of Eastern Europe. He may have been a nice person one-on-one, but he was also one of the greatest forces for evil in the 20th century. Do we attribute this evil to an unhappy childhood, being expelled from seminary, a lust for power, or is there something demonic at work here?

I will never forget watching a portion of the TV mini-series Shoah which focused on the treatment of the Jews in Hitler’s Germany. There was one section in which SS Chief Himmler was visiting a concentration camp and got to see a demonstration of prisoners being gassed to death. That evening Himmler went to the home of the camp’s commandant to offer his congratulations for developing such an efficient way of executing prisoners. As he walked into the house, the commandant and his family were decorating their Christmas tree. Himmler knelt on one knee, hugged the commandant’s daughter and said smiling, “You should be very proud of your father for his great service to the nation. Merry Christmas, my dear!”

How do we explain that kind of inconsistency that could murder Jews during the day and celebrate Christmas in the evening? How do we understand a nation that gave us Bach and Beethoven also giving us the Holocaust? Was everyone simply misguided, misinformed, or was there some demonic power at work?

When political and religious figures today do horrendous things, murder innocent people, allow the population to starve to maintain power, use mentally disabled people to be walking bombs, whip women who dare show an inch of skin, shout “God is Great!” as they fly airplanes into buildings killing thousands, are they just misguided, misinformed, or is there something demonic at work here?

Maybe life is not all rational, not all explainable in logical terms. Perhaps there are powers at work that are hard for us to grasp, much less control, and at times, we feel helpless against.

In our gospel today Mark tells us that Jesus and his disciples were in Capernaum. It was the Sabbath and Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. Suddenly, a man in the synagogue who, according to Mark, was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!”

Here is the first major incident in Mark’s Gospel and already there is a confrontation: the will and purpose of God present in Jesus and the will and purpose of evil present in the demon engage in cosmic battle in the very midst of folk like you and me. The issues of life and death, good and evil are fought out in that synagogue just as they are among us in our churches.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” Indeed, the answer to that demonic question is a resounding, “Yes!” Yes! Christ has come to shatter the evil forces that would demean and disparage and destroy human beings. Yes! Christ has come to free us from the demons like those of prejudice and pride, greed and guile. Yes! Christ is among us, warning us that if we devote ourselves to anything less than a divinely directed destiny, we have deserted him – and deceived ourselves.

Imagine the chaos in the synagogue as Jesus and the possessed man confront one another. There is no polite conversation between them. The demon screams and cries out, and Jesus rebukes him. Rebu ked! Jesus shouted, commanded, and ordered! And the evil spirit convulsed out of the man.
I think sometimes we Christians sentimentalize Jesus too much. We think of Jesus as a real wimp. Here in this passage we have a tough, defying, demon-exorcising Jesus, who has the power to conquer every evil force that threatens to undo us. The message is clear: through Jesus God will triumph over all the forces of evil.

That’s good news for you and me. The truth is: we all have our demons. Some of us are living with the craziness of guilt and shame. Some of us are experiencing loneliness, depression and despair. Some of us have our addictions and dependencies. Some of us know the excruciating pain of a friend’s unfaithfulness or the heartbeat of a spouse’s infidelity. Some of us are frightened of dying, struggling with illness, and scared silly that we are losing control of our lives. Yes, we all have our demons that attack us, demean us and ultimately seek to destroy us. You may not choose to call them demons, but how can you know and watch the world around you on any single day and not recognize the evidence that there is still at work in this world a sinister force that opposes God’s will and purpose for our lives?

The good news is that through Jesus we can face the demons within us and around us. You and I live in the power and presence of Christ. The demons still think they can win, but they have already lost. Jesus assures us that God will ultimately triumph over all the forces of evil at work in the world. The victory of God is at hand.

Some of us may remember Edward Shevardnadze who served as foreign minister under Mikhail Gorbachev and would go on to become the President of Georgia. Before being brought to Moscow in 1985, Shevardnadze headed the Communist Party in his native Georgia. After the end of the Soviet Union, Shevardnadze became the President of the Republic of Georgia. On November 23, 1992, in an interview on Georgia’s state-run radio network, Edward Shevardnadze disclosed that he had become a Christian. At his private baptism into the Georgian Orthodox Church, Shevardnadze, a once dedicated atheist like all good communists, took the name Giorgi (George) in honor of his nation’s patron saint. “There was a time,” he said, “when I had Stalin’s portrait on my wall; I now have an icon of the Virgin Mary and Child in my office.”

What does it mean to go from Stalin to the Virgin Mary and Child? Perhaps the meaning can be found at the time when much of Eastern Europe was turning away from communism. In a little Methodist church in Prague, Czechoslovakia, a sign was put up on the building. It was just three words, in large lettering and with an exclamation mark. It read, “The Lamb wins!”

Yes, the Lamb wins. God reigns. The demons are on the run. Demonic powers may still hold people captive, but their time is running out. The day of dictatorships, on the left or right, is coming to an end. The day of leaders whose authority is grounded in lies, cruelty and deception is coming to an end. The day in which people are possessed by forces that control, manipulate and enslave them is coming to an end. The day of exclusion and ostracism on the basis of mental and physical disability is coming to an end. The day of evil gaining an upper hand over good is coming to an end.

The end has begun in Jesus. The demons are on the run. And the end is certain. God wins the victory, whose kingdom, even now, has broken into our midst with power and authority.

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Text – Mark 1:21-28
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