

Epiphany IV

“Just then there was within their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he 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’. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’.”

These words from St. Mark’s account of the Gospel, which we just read, recall the first miracle performed by Jesus in St. Mark’s Gospel account. A man possessed by forces within him cries out, and in essence it is those forces that say to Jesus “leave us alone, we own this person.” Jesus responds, “No, you are wrong; God is the possessor of that person’s soul, and you are in the way of his or her well-being. Get out of their lives.” The demons want to continue the struggle, but in the presence of the Holy Spirit their power atrophies and slithers away.

Everyone of us throughout our lives will contest those demons within us who want to own who we are and whom we might become. Those demons are numerous and varied. They might manifest themselves within us in the form of inordinate anger, maybe occasional jealousy, various forms of addiction, unhealthy thoughts or actions. They may manifest themselves as anxiety, depression, fear or they may puff us up with false pride or a self-righteousness that seems to magnify your faults and blind me to mine. And the difficult part of dealing with our demons is that they sometimes enchant us in alluring ways. It is as though they are Sirens who caress our lives constantly singing, “I am good for you, nurture me.” If we are not careful and prayerful, their insidious songs will become mantras that will own and demean who we are as human beings.

I believe there are numerous ways God challenges those demons and calls them out from us. I also believe that some of those demons are easily removed, many are difficult. The process of challenging and removing those demons begins with an attempt on our part, to move into the presence of the Holy Spirit. That is a discerning process that at some point

begins to allow us to start naming our demons, acknowledging what they are, whether or not we are yet ready to contest them. I believe this discerning process is initiated by God, but God may use several instruments in that process. It may be a spouse, out of concern or fear for their spouse, raising questions about behavior patterns. It may be a friend whose loving embrace gives impetus to a cathartic moment that serves to unleash pent-up emotions. It may be a psychiatrist who, through a combination of listening and prescribed medicines, assists those burdened with depression or fear to begin to move out of their physical and mental prisons.

It is important for us to begin to understand and to accept first, that God loves us and wants us whole, not for God's sake but for ours and secondly, that we are never, ever alone. I know there are moments when we may feel alone or frightened or tell ourselves that no one seems to want to or could understand. My dear friends, those too are moments that we have to contest because those are moments that serve to demean who we are and separate us from those around us. God is always with us, but I urge us to reach out with the understanding that God's instruments--you and me, friends, parents, siblings, neighbors, professionals--are also there with arms to embrace, minds to discern and counsel, and hearts to listen in ways that will challenge the demons within us to come out and be gone, because God, and we, want you whole.

Amen