

Overcoming the demons

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, and Father's Day, June 20, 2010.

...And when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. Luke 8: 35

In his ministry of just three years, Jesus met people of all types and in all conditions and today we read about his encounter with a deranged man. Troubled people were often drawn to him in hopes of being healed and what was referred to as demon possession then is diagnosed today as a form of mental illness. Those who are not in their right mind appear to be possessed by a malevolent inner spirit that has taken over the victim, causing severe behavioral problems. The first thing Jesus does is to ask his name and learns that it is "Legion," denoting a vast number of demons that had taken possession of him. The demons leave the man and enter a herd of swine that literally run headlong down a steep bank and into a river where they are destroyed.

The treatment of the mentally ill has come a long way since that time. When I was in training as a seminarian, I spent my first summer living and working in a state mental hospital at Allentown, Pennsylvania. It was a critical experience for me to live and work with the patients. I learned as much about myself as I learned about the treatment of mental illness. I was at a point when I was not sure I was going to continue my seminary studies and this experience helped to clarify the direction in which God was calling me.

In those days people could be committed to a lockup ward in a mental hospital against their will for most any reason. Many in the chronic wards spent their lives sitting day after day, rocking back and forth with little or no hope of recovery. Some had been brought there by family members to spend the remainder of their lives in a drab and depressing institution.

By contrast, some of the patients in the acute ward were by all appearances quite normal. A check of the record of their mental history would explain why they were there, though I doubted that they received much help. There were others who clearly didn't belong there and the only apparent difference between us was that I had the keys and they didn't. By the end of the summer I felt like an exposed nerve as I came out of the experience with a greater sense of who I was and where I was headed in my vocation to become a priest. Over the years I have come to learn that there is a precarious thin line between those having an intense religious experience and someone having a mental breakdown.

Before treating patients with therapy and medication, the first step in being delivered from the demons of mental illness is to diagnose the "demon," whether it is severe depression, bipolar disorder, paranoid schizophrenia or various compulsive behaviors. A first step, as anyone in alcohol recovery programs will tell you, is to surrender to a higher power. The role of religion in the treatment of mental illness is to claim God's greater power over the "demons" that threaten a person's sanity. God's power is greater than any other that may try to claim a person's mind and the medical world recognizes the ministry of spiritual healing as an integral part in the process of healing the whole person.

On this Father's Day we honor all fathers in life and memory. I lived with a father whose very promising life was cut short by the "demons" of severe bipolar disorder and alcoholism. When he arrived home after serving as a Navy chaplain in World War II, he was suffering from what we now call post-traumatic stress, having witnessed the brutal horrors of war ministering to

the injured and dying in the jungles of New Guinea in the South Pacific. As a young child, it was difficult growing up in that environment. After I was married and we were expecting our first child I had no real role model for being a father. I had to develop my own role as a father.

The seeds of faith planted early in my life took root in me and helped me to grow spiritually. We gave our children a solid set of values and taught them to use their gifts and talents for what they wanted to do in life. We raised them to have their own faith as well as to think for themselves as they pursued their own courses in life. Of course, this resulted in challenging certain assumptions we took for granted and never questioned.

Just as we never grow up until we stop blaming our own parents, we never cease being parents of our children and they never cease being our children. We don't own them; they are only on loan to us during their crucial developmental years. They don't come with instruction manuals and they wouldn't be of much use anyway. Parenting is like teaching children to ride their first two-wheeler; you hold on and run along side of them and then let go. We rejoice with them in their successes and stand by them in their mistakes. We can't take credit for their successes any more than we can take blame for their failures. All we can do is to try to set a good example for them and hope for their understanding when our example isn't so good.

Each generation likes to think that we are handing on a better world than the one we inherited. Whether or not that is true will be born out in time. For the present, which is the only time that matters, we do our part in making a better world by providing our children with the best possible values for making the right choices. I've always believed that having children is an expression of hope and confidence for a better future. That is what I would hope for these six-month-old twins, Madison and Hannah Griffith, who are being made members of the church through Holy Baptism.

The cynics will tell you that youth of today are only interested in self-indulgence. I disagree. When I talk with young people today, I sense in them the real possibility that they can be part of creating a new world order. With God's, they will.