

Karen - Pregnant

SOMETIMES THE DEVIL GETS INTO US

Mark 9:14-29

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Sometimes the devil gets into good people. I don't know how it happens. I can't explain it. But sometimes the devil gets into us. We do things that hurt ourselves. We do things that hurt and destroy others. Then we say, "Why did I do that?" Friends ask us, "What in the world possessed you?" And we just shake our head. "I don't know." Sometimes the devil gets into us and when it happens we wonder how or if we can ever be free again.

Our Gospel lesson tells the story of a man the devil got into. He had a spirit that made "him unable to speak." Couldn't communicate with his family. Couldn't communicate with his friends. Couldn't say what he wanted to say. We all know how devastating it can be to a family when we stop communicating with one another. And he had a spirit that seized him like Jesse Ventura coming up behind a wrestling opponent, putting his arms around him and throwing him violently down on the ground. The man foamed at the mouth. He ground his teeth. He became stiff and rigid. Sometimes the spirit cast the boy into fire or water. He'd get burned. He almost drowned. The man was harming himself and hurting those who loved him. His father felt so helpless. All he could do was stand there and watch his son destroy himself. He didn't know what else to do for him. He probably took the boy to doctors but they didn't help. Then he took his son to church -- to the disciples. They couldn't help. He just about gave up hope for his son. He feared the evil spirit would have the last word and his son would destroy himself.

Most people in the world still believe in evil spirits. Those of us who *don't* believe are in the minority -- we tend to be white and highly educated with a fairly limited vision of what is possible in the world the vast majority of people live in. Belief in evil spirits has been

widespread from time immemorial. The Bible doesn't portray people possessed of evil spirits as wicked, contrary to popular opinion. They're portrayed as innocent victims. People who've lost control of their lives. We do the same when we speak of an alcoholic having a disease. Calling alcoholism a disease rather than a sin helps us to relate to an alcoholic non-judgmentally.

Likewise, in the New Testament people controlled by evil spirits are victims of forces beyond their control. They're not evil people. They're not more sinful. They're victims – like epileptics. We don't blame epileptics when they throw themselves into fire and water. The man couldn't communicate and he did self destructive things but he wasn't a bad person. The best way to describe him is that the devil got into him sometimes and made him do things to hurt himself and others.

Sometimes the devil gets into us. That doesn't mean we absolve ourselves of all responsibility. We shouldn't blame the devil whenever we do things that hurt and destroy ourselves and bring pain to loved ones. But sometimes we listen to the devil and lose control of our lives. Sometimes we listen to the tempter's voice more intently than we listen to God's voice. We listen because the Devil makes everything sound so reasonable, so simple. The Bible is often hard to understand. Satan is never hard to understand. It's often hard to discern God's will for us. But the devil is not hard to understand. He makes his will so attractive. The devil is like one of those credit card vendors who says, "Here's a credit card. I'll give you \$10,000 credit. Look at this! Taste this! Feel this! You can have it now. Don't wait. Buy now and pay later. You can postpone payments. You can stretch out your payments for as long as you want." That's what the devil says. And one morning you wake up and discover that you got an impulse to have something that you're going to have to pay for for the rest of your life. You're no longer

your own person. You're no longer in control of your life. "You owe your soul to the company store." You wonder if there's any hope.

At that moment the big question is, "Are all things possible for the one who believes in Jesus?" The boy's father implored Jesus, "If you're able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Notice – the father says "us". He doesn't say, "Help my son, he's suffering so much." No! He says, "Help us!" Because what his son *had* done and *was* doing was hurting his father as much as himself. "Help us! Help me deal with my son! Help me know how to help him! Help me to believe that he's going to be okay! And help my son! He desperately needs help! If you don't help, if you *can't* help I don't know what's going to happen to him – or to me."

Jesus answered, "All things can be done for the one who believes." The boy's father responded, "I believe, help my unbelief." I used to think he was saying, "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, help me deal with my doubts." But the father has no problem believing doctrinal statements. He has trouble believing his son is going to be all right. He's saying, "I believe you can make a difference in my son's life, but help me deal with my doubt because sometimes I feel so hopeless for us."

As I've grown older I have less and less trouble believing theological affirmations. There was a time when I'd pray, "Lord, I believe you exist, help me when I doubt." But now I pray, "Lord, I believe you can change us, help me when I lose hope."

Friends, you may find yourselves no longer in control of your life. You ask yourself, "Whatever possessed me to let this happen?" You may have done something terribly destructive to yourself and to your family and want to give up – maybe even end it all. Don't listen to the devil! Listen to God! With God all things are possible – you can be forgiven. The past can be redeemed even if it can't be forgotten. Even if you can never repay the debt." *You've stopped communicating*

Every Sunday we begin the worship service confessing our sins. One day you may hear that someone you love and respect is actually what he or she says they are. Sinners! You discover they've done something terribly self destructive; something that brings deep, pain to loved ones. You may be tempted to write off that person. Write them out of the kingdom of God. Hand them over to Satan. Cast them into the outer darkness. Don't do it! With God all things are possible. Forgiveness! Grace! Mercy! Restoration!

The Lord Jesus has prepared a Table for sinners. The Lord's Table tells us that God is more powerful than Satan. God's grace is greater than our sin. If you're not a sinner, don't come to this table! It's for sinners. It's for people who know they need God's grace, love and mercy. If the Lord's Table means anything at all, it means that Jesus can make a difference in your life. Come to the Table! Repent! Believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior! Trust him! Receive him! Present yourself to him as a living sacrifice. Amen.