

7-21-19 The Gadarene Demoniac

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's been a good summer so far. I hope that you as well are having a good time. Not all of us get to have summer vacation. For those of us who do not, it's very important that we keep a balance between activity, vacation, which is not always restful. We all know that. Our recreation, doing the things that recreate to us, that revitalize us, give us energy, and also just rest. Just rest. Having time to withdraw from the busyness of the world, from the busyness of our families, having time alone, having time with God.

For those of us who have a summer vacation, it's a much more dramatic time of simply escaping everything for a while. School is out, the chaos of having the kids at home begins, making plans for, "What? What can I do while I have this time off?" Many of us have traveled. We've had camping trips in different places, different locations, wonderful experiences, memories built. This is all a part of the season that God gives us during this time.

We have, as clergy, the opportunity during the summer. We're a little bit less, little ... Actually, we're not any less busy. We are just busy in a different way. But that difference gives us the opportunity to be with other clergy, to go, as Father Nathaniel and I have recently, to different places. We were at the open house for Father John Takahashi. We were out to the Feast Day of Vespers for Prophet Elias in Santa Cruz, our good friend Father Milutin. Father Nathaniel was there yesterday morning. Yesterday I was up in San Rafael with my dear friend Father Spyridon and his family for the wedding of his oldest son.

When we get out, we have this opportunity to be with people and have different conversations. It's just something that all of us should be doing, taking the opportunity to encounter others, to find out how they are doing, inquiring into their wellbeing spiritually as lay people, asking people, "How are you doing?" Such incredible healing and help and support and hope comes out of all of you, all of you loving your neighbor, loving the strangers in your life, inquiring as to what is going on in their life.

We live in this world that is incredibly busy, incredibly busy. As Californians near Silicon Valley, there probably are not any busier people on the face of the earth. We've had people come and move out to this area.

I remember a family many, many years ago coming out, to my father helping them. They moved out, I think, from Tennessee. They moved here and, a month later, they left. They just said, "Having come from the Midwest, we just can't live in the intensity that you all

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live with." We don't even know how busy we are until we go away and retreat for a while and realize that it takes us a week to just stop thinking, that crazy pace that we keep in our mind.

You can work wonders in other people's lives by simply being interested in their wellbeing, having a dialogue with them. We see in today's gospel reading that this encounter with Christ in this region around the sea, even with the demons themselves, there is a dialogue there. There's an exchange of words, of thoughts.

Christ appears on the shore. The demoniacs are there. They come to him and immediately they address him, and they address him with his proper title. Remember, this is a time when the angels are even wondering, "Well, is this the Son of God or is it the greatest of prophets that ever existed?" The demons come up to him and say, "What do we have to do with you, oh, Son of God." That's his proper title. They know who he is. They've figured it out. Or we could say they took the risk of guessing that that really is who he is. He doesn't say no, by the way.

Often critics of scripture will say, "Well, Jesus never said, 'I am the Son of God.'" That's because they don't understand humility. But every time someone calls him the Son of God, from a human to a demon, he doesn't say no. He doesn't say, "That's not my title," or, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm not him." He is the Son of God.

They mock him a little bit, some of the fathers say, even in saying to him, "Have you come to torment us before the time?" They know a time is coming. They know a time is coming that Christ is in charge of because the Father has put him in charge. He is going to direct it.

A time is coming where the demons, because of their rebellion against God, are going to fall into a state of what to them? Just like the rich man who finds himself not in the bosom of Abraham, they will find themselves in torment. Not because God is there with fire and brimstone torturing them, but because the decisions, like us, that they made result in a state of existence that is tormenting, a state of separation from God, a separation from our own being.

But they're having this dialogue and, after this crazy thing happens, they ask Jesus, "Can we go into the pigs and at least experience a little bit more pseudo-incarnation, having control over other creatures. We're going to give up these two men. Can we at least have the pigs?" And Jesus says one word, but he talks to them. One word, "Go. Go." They obey

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him and they go into the herd of swine. They rushed into the sea. We all know this dramatic story.

Realize also that the local economy just got destroyed by Jesus. They're selling those pigs, they're not pets. They're raising those pigs, pigs to sell at slaughter, to sell at the market. The entire herd rushes into the sea. The local economy is destroyed. The people come out of the city, they encounter this person who has healed two men, restored them to their humanity, restored them to their town and to their families, and their reaction to him with the words, the dialogue, that they offer is, "Get out of our country. We don't want you here."

So we see that always there's this dialogue going on, whether it is us praying with God, whether it is us arguing with God, whether it is us seeking the wellbeing of our neighbor through words or hiding away and talking to ourselves. There is constant dialogue going on, and that dialogue is taking us to Christ, or it is leading away, leading us away from him.

And while we traveled in the last few weeks, different places, the priests seeing other priests, the priests always seek each other out to have a dialogue, because we are co-strugglers in the same vocation that, quite honestly, very, very few people other than other clergy understand what it's like for us to be a deacon or a priest or a bishop.

I found that one of the most endearing things I can possibly do with our hierarchs is to sit down next to them, forget about their authority for a minute, and say, "How are you doing? How are you doing? I'm not here to ask you a favor. I'm not here to ask you to grant me something. I don't need your permission or anything. I don't even have another problem to bring. How are you doing, your grace, your eminence? How do you make it through everything that you do? What is going on?" And I found that I can say that I have hierarchs that are my friends because we found each other in a simple little dialogue.

So, we want to be having dialogue with our friends and neighbors. When I was talking to one of the priests in my travels recently, I sat down with him ... I love doing this. I sit down, I said, "How are you doing? I haven't seen you for a long time. What's going on?" Nobody asks a priest that, honestly. He said, "Well," we talked a little bit, "things are good, the family is good. Things are going well." But he said, "I'm really at this strange crossroad in our parish."

I was taught very young that you can start the dialogue, but the thing you better do more than anything else is listen. Just listen. You get it facilitated; you get it rolling. But then

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you're there to be advantaged by learning from the wisdom and experience of other people. I'm getting older, but a lot of priests are still older than me.

This is a rabbit trail, but I had a funny experience recently where I realized that some of these younger priests were looking up to me because I was older than them. I went home to my wife and I was like, "I think I have enough gray hair now that they think I know something." It was a strange experience, a strange experience. I'm also always shorter than everybody else, so I just assume they have more authority than me.

He said, "We have this strange thing going on in our parish where we were in a great place financially, we've paid off our mortgage. The people that are here are giving," but he said, "I realized that, as we know in the Christian life, there is no neutral for the Christian life. None at all. You are going forward, or you are going backward."

He said, "We reached this point of stability, and it felt like we were going forward, but I realized actually we just started going backwards. We reached such contentment that we lost our momentum." He went to his parish and he said, "You know what? This might shock you, but we just went on life support. We just went on life support. We have our mortgage paid off; we're doing great financially. If we don't pay attention, this is the beginning of the end because there's no sense of urgency anymore."

He said, "The litmus test we have for that reality is we're not getting any new people in the church. We just started being one of those churches that winds down for the next 40 years and dies because we became content."

I listened to that and I thought, here we are. Saint Lawrence Church in a very good place right now. We have people involved. We have the youngest board of trustees ever in the history of the church. It's dynamic. We have so much going on, so many ministries and everything.

But I realized even in that tiny little dialogue that I had with him that he revealed something to me that I needed to be aware of as your priest, that we can never be in neutral. We have to be going forward. Right now, God is bringing people to the door of this church. I've shared this with the clergy that we're not even doing anything overtly for outreach right now because we have so many people that God is just sending to us.

If a person comes to this door on their own without us going out and talking to them, inviting them in even, we better be taking care of those people because God has delivered them into our hands. He is so committed to their wellbeing that he has woken them up in the morning and said, "Get to church at Saint Lawrence."

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You think I'm exaggerating. That's actually a real story. They walk in the doors here and if we are not ready to do our part ... Because their salvation is so important to God, he didn't even wait for us to publish a book or write something or share something or do some evangelistic work. He just woke them up and told them to go to church. We better be ready to have dialogue with them.

"Who are you? How are you doing? What can I do to help you? Can I be hospitable to you?" Because the minute that the church stops getting new people in it, it has just gone on life support. We just shifted into reverse. It might take a whole generation to accomplish, but the church will die if we are not going forward, and that forwardness is counted primarily by new people coming into the church.

The thing to do, and we heard in the epistle reading today, we hear about the demoniacs talking with Christ in the gospel. In the epistle, we have Saint Paul longing for the salvation of Israel. He talks about we are no longer seeking the righteousness of the law, but we are seeking the righteousness of faith. At that very end, at the very last two phrases, he says that if we have faith, if we do believe in Christ, our God, and our Savior, the Son of God, the true God, that out of our heart, out of our heart comes righteousness.

I think as Orthodox Christians, it would be safe for us to equate that to holiness. We're not just keeping the law anymore. We are not just fulfilling the moral obligations of being a Christian, but we are also acquiring the Holy Spirit through the gift of Pentecost that Christ has given to us.

But he says, "Out of the heart comes righteousness. Out of the mouth comes salvation." Think about that for a minute. Out of the heart comes righteousness, comes holiness, comes devotion to God, making the commitment and fulfilling it. Out of the mouth comes salvation.

And we have two senses of salvation coming out of the mouth. One of them we see in the Great Martyr, Saint Procopius, whose memory we celebrate today, who was a fantastic Roman soldier. He was persecuting the Christians. But on the inside, he was having a dialogue with God, whoever God who might be, wanting to know who he really is. Christ speaks to him, ascends in his life, as he did to Saint Paul, and said, "Procopius, why are you persecuting me?" He was in charge of persecuting the Christians.

He said to him, not like the demons saying, "Oh, you are the Son of God. Are you here at the right time?" He says to him, "Who are you? Who are you? Who's talking to me?" He says, "I am Jesus who was crucified and rose from the dead."

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The only thing that changes in Procopius' life, he goes on being a soldier, he goes on being in charge of all sorts of things that the army is doing, like he will no longer persecute the Christians. When people ask him why, he says because he's a Christian. He starts telling people that he's a Christian. Out of his mouth comes his salvation. Not that we are saved by what comes out of our mouth, but when Christ is in our heart, out of our mouth comes saving things, salvific words.

The other way that salvation comes out of the mouth besides us confessing our faith to others is that they hear it, that they hear it. We open our mouth and the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, our Savior, comes forth to the ears of those around us. Salvation comes to others when we participate in it, by the grace of God and the Holy Spirit, by opening your mouth and sharing the faith.

So, during this time, summer is a time of planting and harvesting, getting prepared for the fall. Plant those seeds that come out of your mouth, those seeds of salvation for yourself and for others. Practice admitting that you're a Christian, telling people that the reason that you don't go and do things on Sunday morning is you're in church. Ask them how they are doing and, when in the dialogue, the moment comes where you realize they're in a state that can only be helped by God. Simply share with them that you used to be in that state, too.

I remember my father encountering Perry Cardoza when he owned the gym in Boulder Creek, and he was an amateur bodybuilder. He's having a hard time in his personal life, though. He is now graduating from seminary and going to be a priest.

When they got to a certain place in their little dialogue and Perry was sharing some things that my dad knew, this is God's territory, not mine. My dad said, "I'll make you a deal. I'm 50, I'm fat, and out of shape. You teach me how to save my body and I'll teach you how to save your soul." They literally made a deal. For the first time in my life and my dad's life, he started going to the gym ever. They would exercise and then they would sit at the bar in the gym and talk about God. You know that every other person walking in and out of there, Perry was this huge muscular monster, and he's sitting there with his little old man talking about salvation.

So, you don't have to go knock on every door to be an evangelist. You don't have to naturally be evangelists, somebody who is comfortable with talking about God. You don't have to be. I'm not. But we have to have enough faith in our heart that out of our mouth comes the words that save us and save the people around us.

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Look simply, no pressure on you at all. Simply look for the opportunity to God gives you to be in somebody else's life. When someone shows up at this door, take them under your wing.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.