

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 23, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

Diabolic Activity: Part 1

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b
Psalm 34
Ephesians 5:2a, 25-32
John 6:60-69

The famous Christian author, C.S. Lewis, points out an important reality in the preface of his book, The Screwtape Letters, writing, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall [regarding] the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors...” It is very important for us to find the middle ground between the two extremes that C.S. Lewis described. And what is that “middle ground?” It includes a belief in the existence of evil spirits, but is rooted in a great faith in God’s love for us and our salvation through Jesus Christ. With that in the forefront of our minds and hearts, we will look, over the next two weeks, at the reality and identity of evil spirits and how they manifest themselves in our lives.

The very first time I encountered someone who was dealing with an evil spirit was during my seminary internship in Rogers. A man called the church one day and his call was forwarded to me. He explained how his house had begun growling at him. He wasn’t joking and he wasn’t mentally ill. Rather, he had been involved in the Satanic occult and was trying to get out of it. He explained to me that it was the false promise of power that had lured him into the occult, but he was no longer able to control things. After consulting our Diocesan exorcist, I quickly employed the help of Monsignor Oswald and we went to the man’s house to bless it. I’ll never forget the look on Monsignor’s face when I suggested he go into the attic and bless it, too, since there might be evil spirits up there!

A much more pivotal and enlightening moment in my developing awareness of evil spirits came many years later when a young man came to my office for counseling. His aunt had sexually abused him as a child and he found himself addicted to pornography. As I led the man in a guided meditation he started manifesting an evil spirit. Not knowing what I should or should not do in that particular case (we don’t get training on these things in seminary) I began asking the demon questions in my head, without speaking out loud. I knew that the evil spirit was real when it began answering my questions, one after the next, through the voice of the young man. At that point, there was no denying the existence of supernatural evil.

Scripture and Tradition tell us that evil spirits are fallen angels. In other words, they are angels who have chosen to be disobedient and not serve God. Just as there are various ranks of angels,¹ there are ranks of evil spirits with Lucifer, a.k.a Satan, as the first fallen angel and the “leader.”² Also, just as all angels have a particular ministry, evil spirits also have their own

¹ In order from the highest to the lowest rank, the angels choirs include: Seraphim (Isaiah 6:1-7), Cherubim (Psalm 80:2), Thrones (Colossians 1:16), Dominations (ibid), Virtues (Ibid), Powers (Ibid), Principalities (Ibid), Archangels (Thess. 4:16), and Angels (Mark 12:25).

² It is only appropriate to put “leader” in quotations marks since there is much dissention among evil spirits—i.e. loyalty, even to Satan, is not one of their strong characteristics.

“ministry.” For example, Saint Michael the Archangel is described in Sacred Scripture as having a ministry of defense. Similarly a particular evil spirit might have a “ministry” of pride, hate, lust, confusion, lies, games, etc. This is important for us to know as we look at how evil spirits impact our lives.

Exorcists commonly talk about two types of diabolic activity—ordinary and extraordinary. Ordinary diabolic activity entails the normal, everyday temptations that you and I encounter. These might include the occasional thoughts that pop into our head telling us to do something sinful or destructive. They might also include certain feelings, such as anger, that get stirred up within us that tempt us to act in a certain way. In such cases, we as baptized Christians feel a sense of freedom that allows us to choose *not* to listen to the voices or respond violently to the emotions. We make dozens of such choices each and every day.

Extraordinary diabolic activity can come in three different forms. The first is called a local infestation. This describes an evil spirit that has attached itself to an inanimate object, plant, animal, or a certain place or locality. I remember a woman coming by my office one day and asking for a copy of the “Prayer of St. Michael.” Since I didn’t have a copy in the office, she asked me if I would type it from memory on my computer and print it for her. I typed the prayer and hit print, but it wouldn’t print. I tried several times and even rebooted the computer twice, but it would not print the prayer.

She seemed a bit perturbed by my inability to get her a copy of the prayer and asked if I had it in a prayer book. I remembered that my predecessor had left a copy of a prayer book in his desk. I got it out and sure enough, the prayer was in there. Since the book wasn’t mine, I let the woman know that I would make her a photocopy of the prayers. I went to the photocopy machine in the hall only to find out it wouldn’t print the prayer. I tried over and over, even rebooting the machine, but it wouldn’t print it. I finally bound the evil spirit in the name of Jesus Christ and the prayer immediately photocopied. While some people would say that it was all just a coincidence, those who are involved in deliverance ministry know that local infestations are real and fairly common.

Our response to a local infestation would include things like sprinkling the area or object with holy water, having it blessed by a priest or deacon, fasting, and/or praying spiritual warfare prayers (i.e. binding the evil spirits in the name of Jesus Christ). Once again, it’s important for us to be mindful of C.S. Lewis’ observation—to be balanced in our perspective about extraordinary diabolic activity. Not every problem in our lives is the result of an evil spirit; yet, we should not go through life oblivious to the problems that are caused by evil spirits.

Another form of extraordinary diabolic activity is called personal infestation or diabolic obsession. This can be described as an especially strong temptation toward sin, yet not to the point of the evil spirit controlling the person’s will or intellect (i.e. possession). Many people who struggle with addictions experience this type of diabolic activity. It is marked with a very noticeable lack of freedom. The person going through this will talk about their lack of freedom and feelings of bondage or slavery to a particular thing.

I hear this type of talk a lot regarding people addicted to pornography. Often, the wives of the addicts cannot comprehend *why* their husbands don’t simply quit looking at the pornography. The men become very angry at themselves, sometimes to the point of hating themselves and being consumed by guilt and shame. Their self-esteem plummets as they tell themselves over and over that they should be able to resist the temptation, yet they keep falling, over and over. While this does not necessarily indicate a diabolic obsession, it can.

Our response to diabolic obsession should be spiritual growth. This type of temptation cannot be overcome simply by continued acts of the will. In fact, such attempts to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” almost always fail and leave addicts feeling even worse. Instead, such persons need to focus less on the excessive temptation and their habitual struggles and more on the love that God has for them. They might become involved in spiritual formation and work on committing themselves to regular daily prayer. With the loving help and support of family and friends, their deepening relationship with God will eventually lead them to a new place of freedom and peace.

The image of a garbage pile is often used to describe diabolic obsession and the process of healing that it requires. Imagine a pile of garbage in an alleyway that is infested with rats. A person can take a broom into the alleyway and swat the rats away, but they will all eventually come back. However, if the person takes the time to clean up all of the garbage, the rats will actually leave on their own. There will be nothing left to attract them. Our deepening relationship with God through prayer and the Sacraments helps to clean and heal the woundedness within us that tends to attract evil spirits.³

Next week, we will look at the third type of extraordinary diabolic activity—diabolic possession, where an evil spirit completely takes control of a person’s will. We will also look at how our current culture tends to desensitize us to the presence and reality of evil.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read Mark 9:14-29. What was required in order for the boy to be delivered from the evil spirit? What does this story teach you in light of today’s homily? What parts of the story most revealed to you the love of God and the salvation we have through Jesus Christ?
- ✚ The Prayer of St. Michael the Archangel:

St. Michael the Archangel,
defend us in battle.
Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the Devil.
May God rebuke him, we humbly pray,
and do thou,
O Prince of the heavenly hosts,
by the power of God,
thrust into hell Satan,
and all the evil spirits,
who prowl about the world
seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

³ It is important to note that evil spirits tend to “hook” into our woundedness more so than our sinfulness.