

## Community of Love

One of the advantages of having been a professor of biology is that it frees me to take the spiritual world seriously. That may sound like a paradox, but it isn't. I know the great value of science, but also its limits. I am also aware of the forces that lead us toward God or tempt us away from God. Those that separate us from God are often called demons in the Bible. That doesn't bother me, because giving them a name makes them easier to confront.

Discerning whether a particular spirit leads us toward or away from God is not always easy. The ancients often warned against trusting the appearance of a would-be angel, because it might be the devil in disguise. In the first reading we heard this morning, Elijah did not have that problem. He was quite aware of the evil that was present in Ahab and especially Jezebel, so he knew that the angel who fed him in the wilderness was from God. In the strength of that food he traveled the long distance to Mount Horeb, when he encountered the living God – not in wind, earthquake, or fire, but in a sound of sheer silence. I love that description. God's presence was a silence that could be heard and even felt.

If the goodness of God was evident on Mount Horeb, the evil in the Gerasene man of the Gospel was equally obvious. He had an entire Roman legion's worth of evil spirits living within him! That graphically describes how he must have felt. No wonder he couldn't be controlled! No wonder the people of the region had great fear when they found him in his right mind, clothed and sitting at Jesus' feet. They depended on having him be the identified location of all of the region's evil. Now that he was free, they would have to face the evil within themselves.

How do we test the spirits in our own time? How do we know which lead us toward God and which lead us away? Here we come to a real problem, not only because spirits can be disguised, but like the Gerasene people, we prefer to look away from ourselves. All I would have to do is identify evil in a political figure or national issue to show how little self-reflection we have. I'd either get a "Yes!" or an angry look. St. Paul was right when his list of things opposed to the Spirit of God included enmities, strife, anger, quarrels, dissension, and factions. Like the Gerasenes, we want evil to be "out there," in someone else whom we can demonize.

Jesus never did that. He focused on healing, not condemnation. In today's Gospel he allowed the legion of spirits to go into the pigs as they wished. One might say he even had compassion for the demons by commanding them to do what they asked.

The readings this morning provide a variety of lessons. One is that God often appears in ways we least expect – in silence rather than in displays of power. Another is that Jesus, the Son of God, *always* has power over what draws us away from God. Jesus is always ready to heal us, and God is always waiting for us to turn toward him. Most importantly, the passages invite us to discern the spirits more carefully, especially the ones that tempt us to identify evil in someone else. What if we focused instead on what it is within us that wants to make others look evil? What if, like Jesus, we were more interested in healing and reconciliation than in condemnation?

This is work we can't do alone. It requires the support of a community of love. It requires a place where people know that they are prone to judging others, where they don't always live by their values, yet want to do better and are willing to be accountable to others. It's a place where they know they have been forgiven by God and redeemed by Jesus Christ. There *is* a place like that. I call it the Church. And that's why I'm a priest these days rather than a biology professor. Teaching science is great, but leading a community of love is even better.

[Pentecost 4: 1 Kings 19:1-15a; Psalms 42, 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39.]