

Gospel: Luke 11:15-26

When Jesus had driven out a demon, some of the crowd said:
"By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons,
he drives out demons."
Others, to test him, asked him for a sign from heaven.
But he knew their thoughts and said to them,
"Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste
and house will fall against house.
And if Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?
For you say that it is by Beelzebul that I drive out demons.
If I, then, drive out demons by Beelzebul,
by whom do your own people drive them out?
Therefore they will be your judges.
But if it is by the finger of God that I drive out demons,
then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.
When a strong man fully armed guards his palace,
his possessions are safe.
But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him,
he takes away the armor on which he relied
and distributes the spoils.
Whoever is not with me is against me,
and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

"When an unclean spirit goes out of someone,
it roams through arid regions searching for rest
but, finding none, it says,
'I shall return to my home from which I came.'
But upon returning, it finds it swept clean and put in order.
Then it goes and brings back seven other spirits
more wicked than itself who move in and dwell there,
and the last condition of that man is worse than the first."

Homily: Are you Listening to God's Spirit or the evil spirit?

Jesus speaks today very clearly in our gospel about exorcism and because he has driven out demons he's accused of being possessed by a demon himself. And so there's this long dialogue on the presence of evil spirits.

Are we possessed by evil spirits as we gather together in church? Certainly not. Are we oppressed by evil spirits? Absolutely.

The perspective of St. Ignatius Loyola is that there's a battle going on inside of our hearts. Ignatius was a soldier, he lived from 1491 to 1556. He experienced this incredible conversion in his life and he became a master of the spiritual life. And part of his perspective, he translated that military imagery, because he was a soldier from a soldiering family, he translated that imagery

into the spiritual life and said there is a battle going on inside of our hearts and let's not be mistaken about it. The evil spirit is oppressing us and God's spirit is encouraging us. And we need to listen to our interior experience and discern what is the voice of God and what is the voice of the evil one.

Sometimes that's very obvious, sometimes it's very subtle and difficult to discern. The perspective from St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians, the perspective Jesus in the Gospels is, "by their fruits, you will know them." The Holy Spirit produces good fruit in our life, the evil spirit produces bad fruit in our life. St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians lists some of those fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

If we are cooperating with God's good spirit, with the Holy Spirit, those fruits will be in evidence. If we're not cooperating with God's Holy Spirit, if we're listening to the evil one then we're going to be producing the fruit of the evil one. And again, Paul lists those as adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, wrath, strife, sedition, heresy, envy, murder, drunkenness, debauchery. When we're listening to the evil spirit, that's what grows within our life.

St. Ignatius says that when we're listening to the Holy Spirit and we're guided by the spirit, we'll experience an increase in faith, hope and love. He calls that, "Moments of Consolation." When we're listening to the demon spirit, when we're guided by the evil spirit, then we're going to experience a decrease in faith, hope and love.

Part of the problem in discernment for us, is that our experience is like a mask that is worn so closely to our faces that we identify and we just say, "this is me." So when we're experiencing anger, or we're experiencing jealousy, we're experiencing the more base movements within our soul. We just say that this is me. Ignatius says, "Pull the mask off and look at that. Examine our interior experience and recognize that we're being oppressed by evil spirits."

When St. Ignatius talks about evil spirits I think he's really distinguishing three different levels of reality. The first is simply our own interior experience, our own base movements of ourselves, our baser nature. A second movement is to recognize that there are forces within our society that will move us toward God and there are forces that will move us away from God.

I think this is one of the great contributions of St. John Paul, he talks about social sin. Sin is not just private, not just personal, we participate in this as people. You can see that when you gather together with some of your friends and you decide, "Let's go out and get drunk." There was a young couple that I know and the young man is a very holy man, but he got together at a bachelor party and they said, "Ok, let's go to a strip club." So they go out to the strip club, they have more to drink than they would, probably any one of them individually, but they egg each other on and they are lead into the midst of some serious sin.

That's a social thing of the evil spirit working, the baser natures coming together. We see that in corporations where the rule is, any one individual may be a holy person, but you come together and we're going to make more money and that's our goal in this corporation, and that's the way

we do it and you keep your mouth shut about what the rules of the corporation are and if you don't like it, there's the door. That's societal sin.

There's a third level and that's what I think is explicitly talked about in today's gospel, of these demon spirits that oppress us. They work on us as individuals, they work on us as a church, they work on us as people of a nation. They oppress us and lead us into war and jealousy and strife. Jesus comes to set us free from that oppression but as we heard in the controversy in today's gospel, the good spirit, the Holy Spirit, is labeled as the evil spirit and the evil spirit is labeled as the good spirit. It gets very confusing because Satan loves confusion.

There are two primary tactics, I think, of the devil and one is to say he doesn't exist. He loves to be hidden. The other one is he loves the limelight. So it's either extreme. Either he doesn't exist or he's behind every rock and every corner and he's so powerful that he's going to oppress us and we need to cower in fear.

I was talking to someone recently who experienced an oppression by the devil. In the middle of the night there was a spiritual attack. And this person was so frightened that they just hid under their covers. And I said, "Did you pray?" And they said, "No, I was too frightened to pray." That's exactly what the devil wants, is to terrify us, is to fill us with fear of the devil. Or the opposite extreme, "Ah, he doesn't exist. What are you talking about? You're making a mountain out of a mole hill."

Today's gospel is very clear: "Satan exists." The Blessed Mother appeared at Fatima 100 years ago to say: "Satan exists." We need to be people of prayer. We need to be people of vigilance. We need to be people of discernment. Of listening to our own interior experience, and examine that daily and say, "What's leading me closer to God? What's leading me away?" Pray for the grace of recognizing that this is the voice of the Holy Spirit, this is the voice of the evil one.

Let me conclude with a beautiful prayer that is attributed to the Rev. George Lucas, Archbishop of Omaha:

My God, you've created me out of love to know you, to love you, and to serve you in a way that no one else can do. Your plans for me are greater than any I might dare dream for myself. Lord, grant that I might be open to your grace, to know the next good step in your plan for my life. Give me the courage and the generosity to say yes. Show me your will for me, oh Lord. And help me to say with Mary, I am the servant of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your will.

Amen. (Amen.)