

CASTING OUT DEMONS

Everybody dreads the thought of a house fire.

Aside from calling 911, what would you do if you discovered your house was on fire, and it's too late to put it out yourself?

What would you try to save?

I contemplated that scenario, and of course it depends on where the fire was. Even so, the foremost priority is to make sure others in the house can get out, but there are some things that I'd want to save, too.

I'd want to get my guitar, and my box with valuable papers, ... and maybe the computer,.... and then there are the photos,.... and.... at some point,.....likely much sooner than imagined,..... the smoke and fire will be overwhelming.

Deciding to give up / let go of precious things in order to save one's life.....would be a terrible point of reckoning.

And, in the Mark passage, Jesus presented similar tough, painful decisions of letting go,..... in order to live.

The text appears to have three parts, yet each segment deals with the same message.

In the beginning dialogue, John who has already revealed that he has some power and control issues, complains to Jesus that "Non-followers" are going around casting out demons.

I suppose, John is thinking that if someone else is casting out demons, then Jesus could lose some of his appeal / his fame.

Demons:

We don't talk much about demons anymore, but maybe we should?

In Jesus' time, Demons were regarded as powerful unclean / evil spirits that controlled or mislead people.

They were not considered to be creature like supernatural, sub-deities, as assumed in very ancient time or as projected in the middle ages.

A Demon is a bad spirit or a corrupted spirit that causes a person to do destructive things.

A demon is something inside a person that taints the spirit, which leads to destruction and separation from God's way.

Getting rid of demons is a good thing, regardless if it is Jesus forcing the ejection or someone / something else.

Evidently, it was important to John that only Jesus and followers of Jesus could be the ones doing good; it was important for him to think that his group was right and others were wrong, no matter the evidence.

That attitude of “my way or no way” seems to be an all too common.

Not long ago, I heard someone infer that Catholics were not really Christians.....

Some insist that spiritual literature or disciplines must only be Christian to be acceptable. And, many church people still think that the way of Christ is limited to the historical Jesus, as if suggesting that God is not big enough to transcend religious boundaries.

Our need to control or to possess the only way / the only standard / the only truth is arrogant, naive.... and.... evidence of a nasty demon.

I cringe when I hear about Christian prejudice that demands purity to its brand, and that ugly head appears not just against Muslims.

My sister is the director of a relief organization that is helping those devastated by the tornado that went through Southern Indiana, this past March. Her agency is very skilled in what they are attempting to do, and they are a part of the United Way. However, their biggest obstacle has been local churches and power hungry church pastors who are trying to get the government grants,..... in order to do “Christ’s” work, and they are telling the rural victims that the United Way is Not a Christian organization, and should use only “Christian” help. The rebuilding and recovery has been slow because those quickly formed “faith based” groups do not know what they are doing. And, so people suffer – the weak, the hurting, and the powerless suffer.

And, to that Jesus warned that it is “better to have a millstone hung on your neck and tossed into the sea, than to hinder the weak / the “little ones.”

If you don’t know what a millstone is, it was a large stone disc that was turned by the pull of a donkey. Like a sandwich, grain was crushed by the swivelling the stone over another large stone. Needless to say, a person would sink –was doomed if they went swimming with such a stone.

By the way, in the Gospels, nothing is written down by accident. It is very telling, and Not a coincidence that the issue of being inclusive rises from a situation / a problem with Demons. It seems that demons are tempting, leading people away from God’s way..... the way of Christ– blocking the flow of love.

We Mennonites try hard to help those who are weak and suffering. We have formed various ministries to assist, feed, help or rebuild the weak and the wounded. Moreover, we affirm being inclusive, yet..... we may have a few demons holding us back.

We still play games that separate those “in” from those “not quite in.”

And, sometimes we hinder the “little ones” – the younger generation, by insisting that we will not embrace newer methods and attitudes.... because we don’t want to change / we don’t want to “let go” of what we desire.

For example, four part singing is wonderful, but maybe we can do more?

Another example, if we don’t want to hinder the youth of Osler from using our church, then we may have to absorb some litter and graffiti.

Part two is the millstone warning – a collective / group sort of warning that is still in the context of being exclusive / of letting go of things that hinder others from being accepted / love.

Part three is where Jesus makes the warning very personal.

This is the section about cutting off body parts if they cause “you” to stumble.

I like Jesus..... he used hyperboles, too.

I’ve been accused, ... of “occasionally” using hyperboles. Perhaps, I can defend my exaggerations by saying, “I’m being Christ like”?

In this case, Jesus is overstating the point so that we get the point.

If,... your hand causes you to stumble / preventing you from “engaging in real living”, then cut it off. It’s better to not have a hand, than end up in.....hell.

If your foot cause you to stumble, then cut it off because it is better to be missing a foot then end up in.....

If your eye causes you to stumble, then tear it out,... and with the same warning.

The New Testament word used here is Gehenna,... which can be translated as hell.

In high school, I dated a girl from Gahanna. Actually, it is the name of a small town in Ohio. ... I have no idea why they would choose such a name.

Nevertheless, erase the notion / the image that hell is a location,.... unless you want to think of Ohio.

Considering hell a location is very limiting, much like thinking heaven is just above the clouds.

Hell / Gehenna is a state of being / of existing,... and it is NOT a happy place. It is a condition of torment, regrets and anger.

Jesus ends this pericope / section with the admonition to be as salt and to be at peace with one another.

The thrust / the message Jesus is trying to drive home is that we may be holding on to things that hinder others from connecting with God, and also that we may be holding on to things that are hindering our own spiritual growth / keeping us from living God’s way. If that is the case, then we

have our own demons, and need to get rid of them, AND.... letting go of them may be a tough decision / it may hurt.

It's not easy to release / let go of things we value / things we are accustomed to / that are meaningful to us.

We've all had to make decisions, from time to time, that meant letting go of something that was once dear to us.

Each stage of aging, demands letting go, be it toys, hockey equipment or expectations. It's pitiful when someone refuses to grow up.

Times change, circumstance change and people change,... and usually that means changing too..... in order to be relevant / real.

The church today can't be what it was 50 years ago or even 10 years ago without being a hindrance to those seeking to connect.

Moreover, the old way of relying on fossil fuels is killing us, and we'll end up in Gehenna if the governments of the world don't change and let go of the old mantra "growth, wealth and development" at any cost.

And, as Jesus pointed out, sometimes those demons that tempt us to hold on ...are very personal. Sometimes the decision to release / to let go is as painful as cutting off your own hand.

We've all heard of stories about mountain climbers who had to release / leave behind a fellow climber in order to save the rest of the group. That would be a horrible decision to make.

It would also be agonizing to leave prized and dear possessions in a burning house.

Maybe it's an old habit that we love that is hindering us?

Maybe it is a need to control / to have everything in order that is keeping us from living joyously.

Or, it could be fears we are coddling,..... or that drive to succeed / to gain approval that is weighing us down?

For some, the need to depend on money instead of God is leading them in the wrong direction.

Sometimes our need to be right is a hindrance,.... or it is our passion for a noble cause that gets in the way,..... and hurts our connection with others and with God.

The way of Christ—God’s way is not really about adopting a set of rules, or believing in certain values or customs.

God’s way is about grace, peace and love,..... and towns may have those names, but they are NOT a location or ...something to merely affirm.

Grace, peace and love is how we live with each other, the world and with God.

And, sometimes,..... tough choices will have to be made.

Two years ago, my elder daughter Jessica, my son-in-law Dima and my grandson Sasha were visiting with us, during a few weeks that summer.

Sasha just turned three. He was cute, but he also had an enhanced three year old edginess.

He was reflecting the increasing tension between his parents.

There was smoke and fire in the air, and it had been spreading for some time.

At that time, Jessica shared with me that hope was nearly depleted, and that she didn’t think she could handle much more.

Dima could have chosen to let go of his cultural programming. Husbands treat wives very differently in Belarus.

He could have let go of those expectations, but instead he surrendered to his demons, and reacted poorly as a husband. He defiantly over reacted. He made some bad choices.

He was still friendly and considerate to us, and that made it hard for me to take sides. Plus, he seemed to value his connection with me.

In addition, I wanted to be above the fray. I wanted to be a person who upholds grace, patience and forgiveness. I did NOT want to be in a burning house.

Before they left, Jessica confided in me, that if he wasn’t at least willing to try counselling, then she didn’t think the marriage would last much longer.

She was being abused in many ways, yet I still held to my higher values of detached civility, patience and forgiveness.

When I said good-bye to Dima, at the airport, I was keenly aware that I may never see him again, at least not as a son-in-law.

Their relationship continued to spiral downward, and Dima didn’t get it. Even a brief stint at counselling did not shake him into considering changing how he treated Jessica.

Through the ugly unravelling, I tried to be neutral. Dima would even call me from time to time, as if nothing wrong was happening, and I engaged with him in the thought that maybe the connection would lead to change.

Yet,..... there came a time for me to make a agonizingly painful decision, and that determination arose from the midst of fire.

With the pain of cutting off my hands and feet and gouging out my eyes, I realized that I was hindering my relationship with Jessica. My daughter was telling me to let go of my pompous, arrogant principles that declared everyone must live in peace and love.

In reality my loyalty to my values was hindering peace and love.

Sometimes,..... people will not change and will chose the path to hell, and that truth must be accepted. This is not an issue of hope for Dima.

It is the reality of me letting go of the illusion that I can control anything.

And,... sometimes, a daughter will cry out for love / to be loved and affirmed.

By the grace of God, I chose love,..... and let go of some of my arrogant ideals,.. ..and a son-in-law.

Big decisions don't come easy.

I suppose it is much like cutting off one's hand.

In addition, I didn't even recognize that demon.

I didn't even know I had that one.

Demons can be very deceptive, and very powerful.

Chances are if you can't chose love, regardless, REGARDLESS of the circumstances,....and if you can't let go of something that is hurting the relationship with another or with God,...then there is an unclean spirit lurking within.

Even so, in spite of a history of coddling demons and illusions,....

.....There will come a time when God will set your heart on fire.

And, that fire will give you the opportunity and the power to choose life and to say, "I CAN let go! I can choose love. I can choose God."

God will set your heart on fire, and it could be a Muslim who inspires you or it could be a Wicken or a Catholic who sparks the flame.

It doesn't matter..... because the power to be free / the power to let go / to give away.....the power to love..... ONLY COMES from God.

In any name, it is only God who casts out demons and offers an abundant life.

And,..... what sustains and saves you and me is the love of God through Christ,.... and a bunch of maimed, one eyed followers.