

**Overcoming the demons**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 19, 2016.

*...And when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.*  
*Luke 8: 35*

The shock of the violent massacre of fifty people by a gunman last week in Orlando is still with us. We have taken part in vigils but that is not enough. If we are serious about stopping such senseless violence, it will take serious efforts at keeping automatic weapons out of the hands of dangerously sick and misguided people. The second amendment to the Constitution was intended for maintaining a “well-regulated militia” and was never intended for everyone to have easy access to fire arms.

Mentally deranged people in ancient times were believed to be victims of demon possession. Mental health science has come a long way and no longer uses the diagnosis of mental illness as demon possession. Those who are not in their right mind who are suffering a neurosis or psychosis may appear to be possessed by a malevolent inner spirit, especially those who hear and talk with inner voices. In our gospel narrative today, Jesus encounters a man who is a victim of a vast number of “demons” that have taken possession of him, causing him to have seizures.

The treatment of the mentally ill has come a long way since I spent a summer living and working in a state mental hospital as part of my seminary training. It was a critical experience for me as I learned as much about myself as I did about the nature and treatment of the mentally ill. My experience came at a critical point when I was questioning my vocation and wasn't sure that I would continue my seminary studies. The experience that summer helped to clarify the direction in which I was being called.

I worked with patients who had been committed to the lockup ward in the hospital against their will for most any reason. Those in the chronic wards spent their lives day after day, rocking back and forth with little or no hope of recovery in that drab and depressing institution. By contrast, many of the patients in the acute ward were by all appearances quite normal. A check of the record of their mental history would reveal why they were there, though I doubted that they received much help. There were others who clearly didn't belong there and the only apparent difference between us was that I had the keys and they didn't. By the end of the summer I felt like an exposed nerve as I came out of the experience with a better understanding of the diagnosis and treatment of the mentally ill. I have come to learn that there is a precarious thin line between someone having an intense religious experience and a mental breakdown.

Before treating patients with therapy and medication, the first step in being delivered from the “demons” of mental illness is to diagnose the disorder, whether it is severe depression, paranoid schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. A first step, as anyone in recovery programs will tell you, is to name the illness. The role of spirituality in the treatment of mental illness is to claim God's greater power over the “demons” that threaten a person's mental state. God's power is greater than any inner malevolent force claiming a patient's mind and behavior. The medical world recognizes the ministry of spiritual healing as an integral part in healing the whole person.

On this Father's Day we honor all fathers in life and memory. I spent my early childhood with a father whose very promising life was cut short by the “demons” of severe bipolar disorder and alcoholism. When he arrived home after serving as a Navy chaplain in World War II, he was suffering from what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder, having witnessed the brutal horrors of war in ministering to the injured and dying in the jungles of New Guinea in the South Pacific. It was a difficult environment in which to grow up. After I was married and we were raising a family I developed my own positive role model of what a father can be.

We never grow up until we stop blaming our parents. We never cease being parents to our children. We don't own our children; they are only on loan to us during their crucial developmental years. It is just as well that they don't come with instruction manuals that wouldn't help anyway. We gave our children a solid set of values and taught them to use their gifts and talents for what they wanted to be in life. We raised them to have their own faith as well as to think for themselves as they pursued their own course in life. Encouraging independent thought resulted in their challenging our own unquestioned assumptions.

Parenting is like teaching your children to ride their first two-wheeler. You hold on and run along side of them and then let go. We rejoice with them in their successes and stand by them in their mistakes. We can't take credit for their successes any more than we can take blame for their failures. We try to do our best and hope that they will understand when we could have done better.

Each generation likes to think that we are handing on a better world than the one we inherited. Whether or not that is true will be taken care of in time. For the present, which is the only time that matters, we provide our children with the best values for making right choices. The cynics will tell you that today's youth are self-indulgent and are only interested in them selves. I disagree. I know some very fine young men and women who have a good grasp of the seriousness of the issues of world in which they are growing up. They want to do their part in making this a better, safer world and they need all the support we can give them.