

## Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

Deut 18:15-20

Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9

I Cor 7:32-35

Mark 1:21-28

Francis J. Caponi, O.S.A.

A few years back, I celebrated a wedding on Long Island. The reception afterwards was held at a country club not far from the church, and the setting was perfect: terrific weather, beautiful grounds, a wonderful banquet hall filled with fresh flowers, an open bar...

Ah, yes: an open bar. Sounds nice to most of us. Very generous, very hospitable. But as a priest, I fear open bars. Because at a wedding reception, I often run into people who haven't been to church in a while, sometimes in a long while. And when you throw an open bar into the mix, the combination adds up to some strange conversations with the sort of people who - let me put this nicely - the sort of people who caused them to run out of wine at the wedding feast of Cana.

Sometimes, good comes out of this. I may be able to answer some serious questions about real problems, put a person's mind at ease, offer a few helpful suggestions that will nudge a man or woman in the direction of Jesus Christ. I may make contact with someone, keep in touch by email or phone or letter, and gradually the person begins to come to Mass again, goes to confession, and has the children baptized.

Usually, though, an open bar means the priest is going to be asked a few off-the-wall questions. Once a rather tipsy woman asked me, "Father, can I have my cat buried with me when I die?" Another time, a very inebriated man asked, "Father, if you wanted to say Mass, and there was absolutely no bread anywhere around, could you consecrate a cupcake?"

I kid you not. That is the power of the open bar.

At this particular reception on Long Island, just such a man weaved up to me and said, "Father, let me ask you something. Have you ever performed an exorcism?" I thought, "Gee, I miss the days when people started conversations with, 'How are you? Where are you from? Where do you work?'" I usually like to know a person for a few weeks before we get to the "Have-you-ever-performed-an-exorcism?" question.

What I wanted to say was, "No, I've never performed an exorcism, but lay down on the floor and I'll give it a shot."

People are interested in demons. In part, this is probably for the same reason people are interested in angels and miracles and appearances of the Blessed Mother: they appeal to our love of the amazing, our fascination with the supernatural. Demons are part of the "special effects" of the spiritual world.

But the great Christian writer C.S. Lewis observed that we can make two errors when it comes to demons: giving them too little attention, and giving them too much. Denying the existence of demons isn't wise. It's like pretending terrorists don't exist. It guarantees you won't be on guard when you need to be.

But giving them too much attention is also a bad idea, because it can distract from much more serious problems.

Jesus confronts a fair number of demons in his ministry. But he confronts far more sinners,

far more many people with hardened hearts. The refrain for today's Psalm is, "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts." That is by far the bigger challenge Jesus faces. Few of us ever need to worry about demonic possession. All of us need to worry about hard hearts. Jesus exorcises dozens of demons. He preaches to thousands of hardened hearts.

Compared to the hard hearts, the demons are easy for Jesus.

In today's gospel, Jesus commands the demon, and the demon instantly obeys. Jesus does haven't to touch the possessed man, doesn't have to throw holy water on him, doesn't have to scream and shout and keep at it for hours or days. He speaks, and it is done. He commands, and the demon flees.

Sinners are not so easy. Jesus heals the sick, but some people still hate him. Jesus feeds the hungry thousands, but many open only their mouths and not their hearts. People see Jesus raise the dead, but then just go on their way, excited but unrepentant. The show was good, but their hearts are still hard. Busy, distracted, their time divided among many responsibilities, they see what the Lord can do and hear what the Lord has to say, but it ends there. It doesn't get under their skin. It doesn't soften their hearts.

To the demon, Jesus says, "Quiet! Come out of him!", and the demon obeys. To us, Jesus says, "Repent your sins! Feed the poor! Forgive your neighbor!", and we say, "Yes, right, absolutely, I will definitely get around to that soon. When my schedule opens up in a few weeks. When things quiet down after the holidays..."

Demons are easy. Sinners are hard.

And so Christ gives us his body and blood, to soften our hearts. Words are not enough for us. Miracles are not enough for us. We need more than special effects. And so Christ dies for us, sacrifices himself for us, and then gives us that sacrifice again and again at Mass. He does not compel us, as he does the demon. He implores us. He does not force us; he invites us. He does not grab us and push us and make us to obey. He says to us from this altar, "See how much I love you! Now, go forth and do the same."

God so loved the world that His Son walked among us. God so loved the world that His Son died for us. God so loved the world that He gives us the body and blood of His Son again and again, though we do not deserve it, though we still disobey, though our words are cruel and our hearts are hard, though we go weeks without caring for the poor and months without visiting the sick and years without forgiving the one who have hurt us. God so loves the world that His Son is here today, right now, with all of us sinners.

You'd have to be a demon not to be moved by so much love.