

I've been talking with the Catholicism 101 class on Sunday mornings about C.S. Lewis' novel *The Screwtape Letters*. The story takes the form of a series of letters from a senior demon Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood, who is a junior tempter. Screwtape is mentoring his nephew as to how to undermine the faith and promote sin in a human to which Wormwood has been assigned. The book is full of observations on human nature and Christian doctrine. I highly recommend reading it if you ever get a chance.

In one of the letters, Screwtape gives his nephew some helpful advice about concealing their existence. He says, "The fact that 'devils' are predominately comic figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that he therefore cannot believe in you."

These words may come from a work of fiction but they ring true for us here today. The notion of evil forces working against us has dulled over time. We like to think that the presence of demons is something relegated to history books or tall tales used to scare children. We sensationalize them in movies and television shows. We dress up like them for Halloween. Demons and devils are merely red cartoon characters with horns and pitch forks to us. We fool ourselves into thinking that we don't have to take them seriously.

Today's Gospel serves as a wake-up call. Whether we choose to believe it or not, there are evil forces that want to lead us astray and keep us from our destiny in Heaven with God. Most of us will never see firsthand someone possessed by an unclean spirit like the man in the Gospel story. Maybe that's unfortunate because it makes the devil and his handiwork easier to recognize. Yet, the attacks we see and experience in our lives are no less real but they are a lot more subtle.

Our journey of faith in this world takes us through a battleground where we can be caught in a deadly attack - an attack that can rob of us of eternal bliss. We live in a world that constantly bombards us with temptation and reassures us that giving into that temptation is a good thing. The demon in the Gospel story didn't have a name. But I think we all could probably name at least one demon in our lives. Maybe it's named Pride. We're holding on to a grudge against someone because letting go and forgiving that person would injure our pride. Maybe it's named Ego. We chase jobs and material possessions in our lives to feed our ego. Maybe it's named Comfort. We are plagued with doubt and stick to the status quo because we're afraid that we might lose our comfort.

Look, I'm not up here to preach doom and gloom and to scare anyone. However, I do think it's good to have a healthy awareness that there are evil forces working against us. We would be foolish to walk through life mindless of the fact that there is an enemy out there intent on getting us - an enemy that wants to separate us from the love of God. The Gospel story is meant to protect us from complacency and to shield us from sleepwalking through situations where we might be hurt. The world tells us that it's no big deal to play with pornography or cut ethical corners in business. It's no big deal to cheat on expense accounts or on our spouses. It's no big deal to pile up the world's goods instead of doing good works for the poor and disadvantaged. We have to wake up and realize that these are not the voices that we need to be listening to.

There is only one voice that matters and we heard the power of His word in the Gospel. Jesus simply spoke and the demon was driven out. Jesus is there at our side to protect us when we turn to him, ready to speak out in our defense. We can always count on Him. It is His voice that we need to be listening to. But the world tries to drown Him out so we can't hear Him. The

noise can even be deafening at times. Jesus tells us what to do when the noise in our lives gets so loud that we can't hear His voice. Just as he tells the unclean spirit, "Quiet!", we too have to quiet the noise in our lives that prevents us from hearing Him.

It's no coincidence that today's Gospel setting is a synagogue, or what you and I would call a church. We can think of the Church as a sort of Department of Homeland Security. The Church offers us protection from the evil forces that lurk around us. It is at Church that we encounter Jesus in a special way – in His word and sacraments. But we have to listen to the word and reflect on it in our quiet moments in order for it to affect us. After all, His words are powerful enough to drive out demons.

This time of year, there is a lot of emphasis on getting the flu shot. The flu shot is designed to prevent us from catching the flu virus. In a similar way, the sacraments of the Church, especially the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, fortify us. They inoculate us, so to speak, against the viruses of evil that move unseen through the world that we inhabit. We simply can't afford to ignore the presence and the power of these sacraments.

The evil forces that work against us would love nothing more than for us to think we don't need the Church or her sacraments. We don't need the Church with her rules. We don't need people calling us to a higher standard. We don't need to be reconciled to the Church and each other when we stumble in sin. We don't need to be strengthened on our journey by the Eucharist. We don't need to rise out of our mediocrity of faith. We don't need to love God above all else. The list goes on and on. Satan is the father of lies.

Brothers and sisters, the truth of the matter is that there is only one thing we really don't need. And that's worry. Saint Paul tells us in our second reading today that we should be free from anxieties. On the cross, Jesus made sure that death would not be our final destination. We

may experience battles against temptation but the war between good and evil has already been won. We know how the story plays out. Good triumphs over evil for all of eternity. All we have to do now is choose whose voice we're going to listen to.