

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

I've been asked to clarify whether the exorcism in today's lesson remains efficacious to this day. Indeed it does, so you don't need to think twice about eating any deviled eggs that are served at today's potluck.

I often squirm a bit when a key narrative detail of a gospel lesson is demon possession. Imagine yourself in a conversation with someone you just met, and suddenly the topic of demon possession comes up. The natural reaction would be to quickly find clues in the conversation to figure out how to navigate safely through this topic. Or figure out ways to exit the conversation completely. I don't know if that has happened to you, but more than once I've told someone I'm a pastor and soon enough they're talking about demons. I know some pastors who, having had those strange conversations previously, will instead tell strangers that they sell fire insurance for a living.

In this world, some people are quick to say demon possession is an actual thing and that it still happens quite a bit. Some people hold the position that demon possession once occurred far more frequently, but for one reason or another it no longer does. Others view "demon possession" as a superstition of the past, and that all along it has been a misunderstanding of one medical condition or another within the field of psychiatry; conditions like epilepsy, or bipolar affective disorder, or psychosis. My point in mentioning those positions is that if someone is firmly

committed to any one of them, it is going to be very difficult to get them to budge. I speculate that most people here have already staked out their position.

So, other than starting off a sermon with some questionable humor about deviled eggs to lighten the mood, where do we go from here? I think we can start by agreeing that there are things in and of this world that can possess us. These can be addictions, compulsions, depression, anxiety, and the list goes on. I'm speaking of things that somehow or another get a hold of us and make us do or think things that we don't want to do or think. Frankly, I can't think of a single person who has developed into maturity who hasn't dealt with this in one form or another. There are things that can possess us that can make us think we love and need certain things, or people, or substances that are actually very harmful to us. Or the possession takes the form of our brains saying disparaging things about ourselves and our abilities.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor and author who has been very open about her life's journey and how her mental health has played a central role in her narrative. She writes that – as a pastor – she also squirms when it comes to discussions of demon possession. She points out that it is especially strange when demons in the gospels come with names. But then she remembers that she herself has given a name to her own depression. I am about to read Pastor Nadia's own words of her experience. In it, she uses one descriptive word of her depression that isn't so polite to use in this setting. So I'll just use the first initial of the word, though hers packs a more powerful punch. Pastor Nadia writes, "I called [my depression] Frances, since she moved in around the same time as the birth of Frances Bean, Courtney Love and Curt Cobain's daughter. But I picture my depression Frances as Courtney Love herself: emaciated in her torn vintage nightgown and smeared lipstick. Frances first stopped by in my teens and early 20s, which was easily written off by my family as me being 'moody.' But later, when I seemed to increasingly like the same things Frances liked — booze, emotionally unstable boyfriends, and self-destruction — she finally just moved in, turning my studio apartment into a Wilderness. She was a terrible roommate. She kept the place filthy and always told me really devastating things about myself. For some reason, when she lived with me, I was no longer able to do simple things like shop for groceries. I'd stand for far too long looking at the dairy case, unable to make a decision about yogurt. She distracted me so much I would forget to eat, and then my parents started to worry. One day my mother Peggy realized that Frances not-ever-moving-out

was my problem and suggested I go talk to a nice lady about evicting her. She's a bit of a dope fiend, Frances, but it ends up there is one drug that she doesn't like. It's called Wellbutrin. Two weeks after I started taking it, the [B] was gone. But not for good. Now, 20 years later it still seems like she knows how to find me and sometimes she'll show up, unannounced, and stay a couple days even though I'm now into so many things she hates: sobriety, exercise, community, eating well, and, of course, Jesus."

As you can see, it doesn't have to be weird to give names to destructive forces in our lives. Those forces can seemingly have their own personalities. Another thing that isn't so weird is how the destructive forces recognize the authority of Jesus. It would seem more likely that Jesus and his authority would be recognized by some of the religious people or even... *I don't know*... his disciples! Yet, many times the disciples are depicted in these stories as clueless about Jesus. The demons, however, are always quick to recognize who Jesus is and the threat he poses to them. The way that he is a threat comes down to what Jesus seeks and what he represents: wholeness. Wholeness... shalom... peace: this is what Jesus seeks for the characters in these stories. Wholeness is what he seeks for you, for me, and for the world. So when Jesus enters a scene, like the synagogue in Capernaum, he represents wholeness, and the demons who are present recognize that. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" they ask. By definition, when wholeness comes to town, they gotta go. That doesn't mean they won't put up a fight, though. I think the destructive forces in our lives try to separate us from those people that we know who – even at our darkest – will convey to us how loved we are. Destructive forces will try to isolate us, so that it is easier to whisper to us that we aren't worthy to be called children of God. Destructive forces will try to get us to avoid hearing the message of Jesus, because hearing that message might lead us to forgive some jerk rather than punching him. Destructive forces will try to instill in us an impulse to fear or to hate others, rather than seeing the good in them. Because seeing the good in them just might make us see the good that God has placed in us. Jesus will not tolerate the presence of those destructive forces as he seeks to bring wholeness to us. Jesus can bring that wholeness to us through the company of others who lift us up and show us how we are loved. Jesus can bring that wholeness to us through medications that help our brains to correctly say that our lives and our bodies have value and worth. Jesus can bring that wholeness to us through an invitation to a table. We may not feel worthy to take our place, but

that isn't the point. The point is that the host says, "Come! I want you to experience my hospitality here, because you are truly a beloved child of mine."

My story is not as dramatic as Pastor Nadia's story of Frances. In a nutshell, I can be easily distracted: a text message comes in, an email, this news notification pops up, a "quick question." It can be any number of things, and they are a mix of personal and professional stuff. As these things arise, I've come to learn that I have difficulty not letting them interrupt the work that requires a long stretch of little to no interruptions, like write a sermon. The result is that the big work often gets pushed into the time that I'm supposed to be spending with my family, and they deserve better than that from me. I want to be clear that I don't resent the texts, phone calls emails, or pop-ins; I appreciate them and I find great value in them. However, I need to take steps to better manage them in my life. I've seen a counselor about it, and the feedback was that I've been juggling a lot, and the more I juggle the easier it is for me to get distracted during the times that I need no distractions. I don't have a name for this destructive force, like Frances, but maybe I should. I'm open to suggestions for a name, in case you have a grudge against someone. Anyway, my counselor has recommended that I use my upcoming sabbath time as a "reset" button of sorts. To put into place boundaries and create clear expectations for how I manage the various tasks in my life, in order that my return to ministry at All Saints is shaped less by distraction and more by wholeness.

So wrapping all this up: are there beings called demons who consciously seek to defy God? Or are the destructive forces in our lives something more internal, like shadows of our own souls? To answer those questions, I return to Pastor Nadia, who writes: "Who cares? I don't think demons are something human reason can solve. Or that human faith can resolve. "I just know that demons, whether they be addictions or evil spirits, are not what Jesus wants for us. Since basically every time he encountered them he told them to [beat it]. And here's the thing: the authority to do just this — the authority to face what tell us lies, to face what keeps us shackled, to face what keeps us out of control, alone, and in pain — and tell [that thing] in the name of Jesus to [beat it] is an authority that has been given to us all in baptism. Baptism is as radical as exorcism. Which means you dear people of God are clothed with the one whom demons fear. Claim it. And tell those demons to [beat it]. In the name of Jesus, Amen."