



“Casting Out Demons”  
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones  
Scripture: Mark 9:38-50  
October 4, 2009

There is nothing quite like hyperbole to drive home your point. “Have you seen the arm on our new quarterback? He can throw it a mile.”

“You won’t believe the size of our chemistry textbook. That book must weigh a ton!”

“Have I been ill? I had a virus that put me in bed for days. I felt as if I’d been run over by a tank!”

We know that no quarterback can actually throw a football 5,280 feet. The chem textbook may be the heaviest book we have ever held, but it does not weigh 2,000 pounds. The virus may have made us ache all over, but it was not as severe as if we had actually been flattened by a tank.

We use hyperbole to grab a person’s attention. We use it to say, “Listen up! This is extraordinary.” And in addition to putting an exclamation point on what we are saying, hyperbole also makes our words memorable. We attach an exaggerated picture to our words so that others won’t forget. In reading the gospels, we discover that Jesus was a master of hyperbole, regularly employing this figure of speech to make a lasting impression on his disciples.

You may know that, in the Gospel of Mark, the disciples are not portrayed in the most complimentary fashion. The author continually pictures them as a dull group of guys whose brains are the size of BBs. (Hyperbole).

For instance, Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower to a crowd of people that includes the disciples. After the crowd has dispersed and the twelve are alone with Jesus, they say, “Uh, master, we didn’t really get that one, could you explain it to us?” (Mark 4:1-13). And Jesus has to interpret each part of the parable.

On another occasion, Jesus says to the disciples, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees.” And the disciples gaze at each other with blank stares until one of them finally says, “He’s saying this because we forgot to bring bread.” And Jesus replies with exasperation, “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not understand?” (Mark 8:14-21).

Just a few verses before this morning’s passage, Jesus tells them that he will be betrayed and killed, and after three days, rise. And the disciples have no clue what he’s talking about, but they are afraid to ask because they realize that Jesus is put out with their lack of mental prowess and they’re scared he might jump down their throats. (Hyperbole).

In today's passage the hapless disciples are at it again. They intend to impress Jesus with their dedication to him, but instead leave Jesus thinking he should give each of them a pink slip so he could recruit a brighter batch. "Teacher," one of the disciples says, "We saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

Jesus was not impressed and responded, "Don't stop him...whoever is not against us is for us...whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

Jesus knows that their actions were not motivated by their devotion to him. A few verses earlier, we read that a man brought his demon-possessed son to the disciples to be healed and they were unsuccessful. Shortly following their failure, they see someone, who is not a disciple of Jesus, able to do what they could not do. Do they stand in awe of this other person who could bring about healing? Do they congratulate him for relieving someone's misery? Do they say "Thanks be to God, this person has been liberated from his demons?" No, they respond with supreme pettiness: "We tried to put a halt to it because he wasn't in our group."

Jesus is appalled and says, "Don't do that! Whoever offers a cup of water to drink - that is, performs an act of mercy - is on the right path. We need more people casting out demons, not fewer."

Imagine how exasperated Jesus must have been with the disciples. Day after day he shows them how God wants them to live. Reach out to others with kindness, feed the hungry, forgive others, comfort the afflicted, heal those who are ill, strive for peace. And the next thing he knows, they come marching up to him and say, "We saw a man casting out demons and we tried to stop him because he was not following us."

I can see Jesus shaking his head and grumbling, "What am I going to do with these guys?"

And he settles on a strategy that he hopes will communicate his message. He will make such grand exaggerations that even these guys will not be able to miss his point. He says, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."

The disciples' eyes become as big as saucers. (Hyperbole). But before they can get over their shock, Jesus jolts them again: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go into hell."

The disciples rock back on their heels, but Jesus does not let up. "If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell."

By now they are surely staggering, but Jesus serves up one final graphic image to knock their socks off. (Hyperbole) He says, "If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell."

We know that no one is literally going to cut off a limb or pluck out an eye. Jesus employs hyperboles to emphasize how crucial it is to avoid any behavior that might encourage someone else to head down the wrong path. He's warning us to keep in mind that the way we live influences others.

He's saying that if someone cuts you off in traffic and you retaliate, you will not help the situation. You will simply raise the other person's level of anger. If someone criticizes you and you counter with your own acerbic response, you will encourage further carping.

Jesus says "Watch what you do. Be careful not to become the trigger that prompts someone else to be unkind, hostile, selfish, deceptive, disloyal, violent or prejudiced."

Jesus is taking “Love one another” and ratcheting it up. He’s not simply counseling us to return kindness for kindness. He’s not saying, “Love those who love you. Respect those who show you respect. Be fair with the fair-minded.” That’s expected of anyone. But that is not Christ-like love. What Christ urges us to do is a thousand times more difficult. And I’m not sure if that’s hyperbole. He says, “Love your enemies. Forgive those who continue to wrong you. Turn the other cheek. Be kind to the hateful. Be fair to the unjust.” This is what it means to follow the difficult and demanding path of Christ. But it carries with it something powerful: the potential of freeing people from the demons that possess them.

If you want to deepen your connection with Christ by casting out demons that you encounter, be compassionate with the cantankerous, gracious with the grouchy and benevolent with the belligerent.

A colleague, Jim Lowery, recalls a flight he took from Memphis to Asheville, North Carolina.

When he stepped onto the plane he was struggling with his luggage. There was little available room in the overhead luggage compartment, and the aisle was crammed with people.

Eventually he found a spot for his luggage and plopped into his seat. That’s when he began to notice a woman whose name ‘must have been Grace.’ She sat in seat 18E. At least she eventually sat in seat 18E. Jim was in 19E right behind her. She was not quite old enough to be a grandmother but nice enough to qualify. When she entered the plane she placed her carry-on luggage into the overhead compartment, and then settled into seat 16E. Jim went back to 19E, and as he sat down, he saw from the corner of his eye a flash zip down the aisle. It was a little girl. Immediately he heard a voice: “Jessica! Come back here RIGHT NOW! I’ve had it with you!” Then he heard more from Jessica’s mom. “Lady, you’re in my seat.”

“Oh,” said Grace, “I thought this was 16E. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, it is 16E alright, but 16E is *my* seat. Let me see your boarding pass. She examined it and said, “This says 18E; are you blind?”

“I’m sorry,” said Grace “It must be my new bifocals.”

Again the woman said in a loud voice, “This is all I need! Jessica, come back here!”

There was stunned silence in the plane while Grace resettled herself in 18E. The silence was broken by Jessica’s mom as she buckled her daughter’s belt. “I don’t want a peep out of you, young lady.”

Once they were airborne and the captain had turned off the seatbelt sign, little Jessica’s head popped up over the back of the seat and she was looking directly at Grace. Jessica was clutching a teddy bear in one hand and sucking her thumb with the other. Grace waved at Jessica with just one finger and little Jessica waved back. Pretty soon she took her thumb out of her mouth and Grace made the sign of drying her tears. And Jessica made the sign of drying her tears. Then Grace made the signs of patty cake, patty cake and little Jessica in return made the signs of patty cake. Then Grace did teensy weensy spider and little Jessica did teensy weensy spider. Jessica’ mom was watching all of this out of the corner of her eye and it continued until they landed in Asheville.

Once they were on the ground, Jim said, a funny thing happened. It was like something had cleaned out all the air around seat 18E. Everyone in that area was pleasant with each other. They helped each other retrieve their carry-on luggage. They stood back and let each other go in front. They struck up friendly conversations.

And then, in the terminal, Jim saw Grace and Jessica's mother talking to each other and they were both ginning. Everyone who was near seat 18E that day caught a little glimpse of the kingdom of heaven on earth.<sup>1</sup>

Grace is one of those people who goes through life casting out demons. Christ would be thrilled if you lived your life in such a way that a total stranger might hazard a guess that your name is Grace.

#### NOTES

1. From a sermon by Michael Lindvall preached at Montreat Conference Center in Montreat, North Carolina on June 17, 2003.