

**Nurturing the Well-being of Our Souls**  
**Sermon by Jerry Howe, New Song Episcopal Church, Coralville, Iowa**

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In 1971 a novel by William Peter Blatty was released entitled *The Exorcist*. I have a distinct memory of it having done one of three things to my classmates.

First. It caused many of my class to read a novel for the first time in years that they were not required to read.

Second. It upped church attendance by teenagers substantially for a few months in Floyd County Iowa.

Third. It caused a lot of discussion: of belief in one's own soul, the idea of possession by an unclean or evil Spirit, was there such a thing as the devil. And what was one's faith beliefs and many urban legends regarding Exorcisms that were going to be or had been done in the State of Iowa and how many family members five times removed had witnessed them.

In 1973 the book was made into a film that still rates as one of the highest grossing horror films in the history of the industry. And I can recall once again when friends were home for Christmas vacation discussing the merits of the film, of their souls and their beliefs. And, for at least that winter season, church attendance by the youth of Floyd County was most likely higher.

In my life neither the film or the book scared me too much. At this point in time I had been several years out of a Catholic School and indoctrinated into the secular ways of public school, went to Wednesday night catechism class but probably not as regularly and had started down my path of a holistic approach to my studies of new age ideas. I was always a bit surprised in some ways how the myth and legends of the Catholic church fit into some of the same ideas of the New Age. And still in my mind there are more similarities in all religions versus differences. Maybe it is my issue with commitment that makes me feel this way. As Christopher Epting mentioned last week, it seems as if movements eventually turn into institutions. At this point the institution of the Catholic church talked less about Exorcism and the concept of purgatory was on the way out. I still miss purgatory. It always gave me the hope of a back way into heaven.

So, this past week I had a birthday, got an invitation to my 45th-class reunion in August of this year and looked at pictures of high school friends and thought, God have they aged. Until I walked past a full-length mirror and think God how you have aged.

But it has been a time for reflection. In my class of 210 students in Charles City in 1973 there may have been a handful that no longer believed in religion. There were only two Jewish families in a community of ten thousand and maybe only one permanent Latino family in the community and no Black families or Asian American families.

Churches thrived, most of my friends regularly attended youth groups on Wednesday nights and there were no school functions scheduled on Wednesday nights or Sundays. So, students could attend church functions. That of course doesn't mean that we weren't sinners. The church that I attended was able to maintain three full time priests. Now it has one full time priest and an itinerate priest. The community is now less than ten thousand, but I would say church attendance is disproportionately lower than what the size of the community is today.

So, having a discussion of our souls, and our beliefs about evil after reading the book or watching Linda Blair in the movie throw up pea green soup was based in somewhat similar experiences with our churches and our upbringing.

But it dawns on me that it is my generation and the kids of my generation that have started the movement of leaving churches in droves. Of course, our parents had experienced World War II and the Korean War and the fragileness of life may have affected the importance of the need for spiritual life. But I wonder why and how institutions of faith have failed us? Even mega churches are starting to feel the pinch.

How and where in our lives did the authoritative voice of God start to leave us?

In today's Gospel it was the man with the unclean spirit who identified this amazing preacher and called him by name. Jesus of Nazareth the one of God. I am not sure if it was his preaching, the exorcism that got the parishioners excited or the fact that the demon called him by name. One of the three is what caused Jesus the one of God's fame to rise. It wasn't his athletic acumen, his acting acumen, his wealth and fashion style and his politics of the time were more radical than any had ever witnessed.

Crowd mentality is an interesting thing. Did people start to follow to see Jesus do battle with unclean spirits then started to catch on to his teaching? Or did they catch on to his teachings and an exorcism was just bonus? Interesting to think about isn't it?

For myself I believe we all have a soul. I also believe that many people suffer from an acute case of soullectomy. We have forgotten the importance of how we treat our soul and how our soul is there to help us live the most fulfilling life we can. I try to talk to my soul carefully as I don't believe it responds the same way as my senses do in this plain of existence. Part of my soul nourishment is coming to church on Sunday. Several of my friends who have been around palliative care in the medical world will claim that almost everyone in the medical world has witness some sort of soul phenomena when a patient has died. Many of them don't talk about because it doesn't have a frame work in the medical world to describe it. There is no medical code for a soul experience.

But what would we do if an unclean spirit walked into this door and caused a distribution? Some of us can hardly stand it if a kid acts out of turn in our moments of deepest piety on a Sunday service. I can't imagine what the looks would be like if true evil came through the door. Would the healing ministers have enough juice in their spirit to cast the demon out?

I do believe in evil and I have question marks about the devil. I will admit that I do a form of blessing and releasing of negative energy around my home and office on a regular basis.

Especially if I have hosted an event with some of my ne'er do well friends. And no, I don't use sage. Smells too much like pot and I can't stand the smell of happy grass. And I have seen evil. There is a documentary called, "Deliver Us from Evil" that follows the story of a California priest by the name of Oliver O'Grady who was one the worst pedophiles in the Catholic Church and how the church covered it up. In this documentary they interviewed him. He had been deported by the church back to Ireland and housed next to an elementary school. At one point he turned and looked at the camera and in that moment the sense of evil that came from him took my breath away. More real then Linda Blair could have ever played it. If your blood pressure is ever low rent the documentary it will be raised in no time.

So, what does all this rambling mean to me and to New Song and this Gospel?

Next Sunday is the annual meeting. And as I have no problem in pointing out that is one institutional event that just leaves me cold. But I will be out of town in the city of evil Las Vegas. And in this meeting, I am sure will be discussed how perilous our financial situation is? How do we get new people to attend? What does the building need if we had a nicer building would it follow that more people would attend? What is the long-range plan for spiritual leader replacement? Ad nauseum! And my mind wandered a bit. What if we advertised all are welcome services at 10 AM and exorcisms of the unclean every other Sunday at 11:30 AM...but that is another sermon.

But will we talk about the well being of our souls, will we talk about the well-being of the soul of our church. Will we talk about the way our church can feed our souls beyond a Sunday service? Will we talk about our and our churches soulectohmy and what we can do to restore the Authoritative voice of Jesus of Nazareth the one of God. Especially in a world today that feels like it is in one massive need of an exorcism.

Why do I come to church on Sunday? I love the wonderful musical talent of New Song. My New Age side would say if you call a church New Song it should attract great musicians and it has. The liturgy is less important to me, its comfort comes from my faith tradition not necessarily the form. I am in awe of the preaching talent in this congregation. Most the time my mind will wonder during a sermon (my New Age side calls it a busy head). But the preaching here is grounded, wise and personal. But mostly I come for the community. I do miss that fact that the two sometimes disruptive munchkins that would crawl all over my lap don't come here anymore but I still come for the community that embraces me when I am being the worst of one of Gods odds and ends.

I also come for all the things you can teach me and the things I still need to learn. And the authoritative voice of God does show up when you need it.

At a recent spirit school where I was bemoaning the annual meeting when Elisabeth Swain so gently gave me the perfect definition of New Song. Jerry, she said, "It may seem like nothing gets done at the annual meeting but how New Song works is different. Some one will pick up on and idea and run with it. And that is what I love about New Song." And as I let that sink it is beyond amazing how we at New Song confront the evil facing the world today in the most remarkable ways.

Each of us has demons in our lives that we need to exorcise. Each of us need to nurture our souls and find the ways that we can reconnect our souls to ourselves. We need to work together to find the way the institutional church does it soul work to bring the faithful back to the authoritative word on God. That maybe the hardest of work of all. And I fear that it will take a cataclysmic event for that to happen.

But what each of you do out in the world every day to make it a better place is awe inspiring to me. There is not one of us here that doesn't do something to make a difference. And it is the lesson from Elisabeth Swain I needed to hear that day to help me reconnect my soul to myself and to this church. It is a model that maybe we don't brag enough about. All are welcome, and all are working to live the Gospel of the chosen one of God. And it is because of our actions that I believe we embody today's Gospel and it is in our actions that I believe that the numbers game of the church will take care of itself. The soul of a person and of an institution have unique ways of manifesting when we give it the proper time and space and attention. Maybe we need a directory and contact information of all the varied out reach New Song people are involved in as actions always speak louder than words.

To paraphrase a Dali Lama quote there will always be evil in the world. But in a world of 7 billion people the evil ones are but a handful.

In that perspective I think we can handle a handful. So may we continue or constant search on how best to be making a difference in the world and spreading the authoritative love of God through our actions and or deeds. From this the rest will follow as from night into day.

And all of God's working Children say, Amen!