

The man with the unclean spirit convulsed, let out a loud cry and then became completely still ... which for some reason was the scariest of all. Service concluded quickly, and people almost ran out, careful to walk way around the poor fellow and not look at him.

Finally the leader of the service said goodbye to the last fleeing worshipper and returned. "Son, what in the world just happened?" he asked, putting a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Well, sir ... I've had an unclean spirit for 14 years. I couldn't will my way out of it, or pray my way out of it. The more resolutions I made, the more I broke them. I felt humiliated and worthless. I hated myself.

And then comes this one. He fixed on me, his eyes went through skin, muscle, nerve and bone ... to me, the actual me, the truest me. It was awful. I was so angry and ashamed I stood up and started screaming at him. His eyes never left me, as some spirit went out from him and took hold of what was unclean and twisted inside. There was horrible pain as I felt my whole spiritual self jerked straight and brought into alignment. I screamed. But now ... I feel wonderful. He took complete charge. He had such ... authority."

"What was your unclean spirit?"

Fear came over the poor man's face; then cleverness. "Oh, I didn't think the particular shape of my uncleanness need disturb you. Suffice to say it was like all unclean spirits: an addiction, a compulsion, a bad habit bigger than you are, and it controls you instead of you control it."

"I know about those spirits," sighed the leader of the synagogue. You swear you're going to stop feeling jealous or greedy or lazy or rude or short-tempered ... but you don't. You can't help it. Your heart just laughs at you as you carry on doing or being what you hate. Jesus has authority over unclean spirits like that?"

"I think he must," smiled the man, standing up and walking back into life more free and confident and happy and grateful than he had in years.

Great story. I'm so glad Jesus delivered this man from his addiction or compulsion, or bi-polar or schizophrenic disorder, or depression or chemical imbalance or whatever it was. And I personally know people Jesus has healed. Healed immediately, because they prayed, or a friend prayed, or they got the sacrament of anointing. And Jesus obviously has power that counselors and psychotherapists and even other people of prayer don't.

But what about the people who pray to Jesus ... or we pray for them ... or they even get anointed ... who aren't healed like that? It happens, the most famous example being St. Paul, who asked ... begged ... God three times to be delivered from some mysterious thorn in his flesh. God's answer: No, Paul. I heal some people from these spirits, because that's what they most need ... and others I don't, because what they most need to do is to learn to rely on my mercy. Rely on my mercy, and count on receiving it even

when at the time of your death the unclean spirits are still very much in control and you have much unfinished spiritual business.

Today, you may be aware of some unclean spirit that has control of you, or one of your children, or a friend. We're told that Jesus has been given authority, and will use it. He will use it in the twinkling of an eye, as today ...or little by little ... or perhaps even after death ... teaching us in the meantime to bear the humiliation and shame ... and not flee the synagogue but rely on what alone is truly reliable anyway --- God's mercy.