

Life in An Empty Home
(From the Gospel)

Luke 13:14 Jesus was casting out a devil, and it was dumb. And it came to pass, when the devil was gone out, the dumb spake; and the people wondered. 15 But some of them said, He casteth out devils through Beelzebub the chief of the devils. 16 And others, tempting him, sought of him a sign from heaven. 17 But he, knowing their thoughts, said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. 18 If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand? because ye say that I cast out devils through Beelzebub. 19 And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out? therefore shall they be your judges. 20 But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you. When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. 25 And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. 26 Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first...

The picture our Lord creates in these last few sentences is a very interesting one. He has been dwelling upon the mysterious and frightening topic of exorcism, when the power of God is employed to overcome evil, invisible spirits which have taken up residence within human beings, claiming them, as it were, to be their own rightful real estate. That these demons are powerful and malevolent is proven by numerous accounts of their affect upon their hosts, as is evident from so many Gospel accounts. That their removal requires something far more effective than three years of expensive psychiatric sessions, or a regimen of medication, or any other purely human intervention, should be clear to all except those who refuse to believe in such things.

I want to focus especially on the peculiar image that Jesus offers of the plight of an unclean spirit following its expulsion. He pictures the spirit wandering aimlessly about, seeking some other unwitting soul which it can possess. But it discovers with pleasure that no one has taken up residence in its former dwelling. The Bible scholar and Anglican N.T. Wright notes that Jesus can't be denying the value and effectiveness of such deliverances. Wright explains how the parallel version of this saying in Matthew (12:44 ff.) offers a context that assists us in understanding Jesus' point. Jesus enemies have committed the "unpardonable sin," speaking against the Holy Spirit and attributing the work of God to the devil. Their rejection of Christ will bring the rejection by God of their temple, their religion, and their place as a covenanted people. Their house, purified by the refiner's fire promised by the arrival of the Lord, would have been ready for their reoccupation. But there it sits, empty, ripe for the taking.

There is an old expression with which we are all familiar: "Nature abhors a vacuum." Empty lots fill with weeds; old sheds with cob webs; unused shelves with dust. The principal is even more true with spiritual things, although human pride denies it. Virtues not unpracticed are

replaced with hard-heartedness. Graces unused disappear, and we are left to function on our own power. Blessings that aren't acknowledged are removed, to be replaced by the inferior products of our own making. Goodness and evil do indeed vigorously compete for the same space.

Notice the unclean spirit's statement: *I will return to my house whence I came out...* He hasn't given up ownership, because he recognizes that the rightful owner has failed to take possession of his property. It now becomes the spirit's, by default. And his intentions in occupying it are far worse than his original ones were, for he brings with himself a band of wicked spirits who will multiply the original damage seven times more. *The last state of that man is [indeed] worse than the first.*

Now I want to apply this figure to our times. If one desires an objective understanding of history these days, one has to turn away from the prevailing sources that are seeking to alter it so thoroughly that it loses any resemblance to what has been previously and generally understood. All of the Western nations, and especially ours, have become blind to the degree of deliverance they have been afforded, whether from ignorance, or hunger, or open warfare, or disorder, having been granted instead the wonders of advanced medicine, unlimited communication, prosperity, and military protection. But now that those past "evil spirits," so to speak, have been overcome by the mercy and goodness of God, the house of western civilization just sits there, swept and garnished, as much in denial of the source of its blessing as were the religious leaders of Jesus' day.

The upshot is that the unclean spirit has returned in force, and in new form, in the company of others *more wicked than himself*. The owner of the house has failed to be proactive in building and encouraging the virtues that would be necessary to withstand the next assault against the very structural integrity of his dwelling. In his time of peace and prosperity, he has only learned to scorn and even despise the One who had secured his deliverance. His liberty has allowed him the grand luxury of ingratitude. And little does he suspect the degree of intensity of the next effort that will be made to gain possession of all that he has been given.

It has begun, actually, in subtle ways, but why would one suspect differently? It's been like taking candy from a baby. Let's go to the councils of evil, where the matter is being discussed in session: "Victory won't be won," is the consensus, "through blitzkriegs, through overt efforts at territorial expansion, through the impolite and uncivilized means of open warfare that modern men consider beneath their dignity and station. No, let's remove their freedoms and their liberties bit by bit. Deprive them of control over their lives. Make the matter of mere living so miserably complex and unmanageable that they will be obliged to surrender the process to us.

Meanwhile, mesmerize them with ever more astonishing forms of entertainment. And finally, remove from them their cherished institutions, tarnish their heroes, and entirely reconfigure their understanding of the past. Finally, they themselves will do our work for us. They will destroy the righteous and righteousness, and raise up the wicked and blasphemous.”

What does such a state of affairs mean for the Church of Christ? We are stretched beyond the limits of amazement when we realize that this spiritual hostility is aimed directly at us, the seemingly weak, small, inconsequential group of believers called the Body of Christ. How can it be so? Because we are the visible representatives on earth of the Triune God who is in fact the ultimate target. For *Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying 'Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us'* (Ps. 2:1-3). Realizing that this is the state of things, is profoundly difficult. It means, in effect, that life can no longer be the same for us. Whereas in times not that far past, the society was amenable to the place of God, Christ, and real Christians as necessary and needful, these times have ended, and it might be safe to assume that they are irrecoverable. This is the negative side of it... merely accepting such a the shocking fact.

On the other hand, the opportunity for the demonstration of true Christianity is a very bright one, indeed, and it is one that will be evidenced not only by our willingness and availability to display our faith through real service to our communities, but by how we handle open, in-your-face opposition. As the days grow darker, the light of Christ will rest ever more brightly upon those who humbly submit to the circumstances, take up their crosses, and follow Him.

Things are still gray out there, not yet black. People are content with the haze, and not too alarmed, and believers themselves are not yet shining with the intensity necessary for the times ahead. But as the sun of God's favor sets, and haze turns to the confusion and fear of darkness, our light --God willing-- will be free of all present obstructions to its brightness, so that those who desire might see their way to safety.

As believers, we are privy to the secrets of God. This is a very grave responsibility. *We have the mind of Christ* cried the Apostle. We should not be ignorant of the dynamics in play that drive all of human life. Whereas others are in possession of a thousand impediments to clear sight, the Christian is gifted with an *eye that is single*, that allows *his whole body to be full of light*.

It is sad, beyond sad, that a house once proudly owned, honored, and well tended should be abandoned to the possession of the worst of evil spirits. But knowing this, recognizing this,

and accepting it, are the doorway to the most effective and joyful ministry which we could ever imagine.

Therefore let us encourage one another in these things.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.