



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Challenging the Demons

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

Annual Meeting, January 29, 2012

Imagine the scene in the synagogue – Jesus was teaching and the people were enthralled. He was talking about God in a way they had not heard before. It got to the heart of what they knew was true and good and imparted a vision of a better world. Then suddenly the wild man stood and started shouting, as if he were in pain. The demon within him feared Jesus and wanted to be left alone. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth, Have you come to destroy us?” With a word, Jesus does just that. Those who witnessed the instant exorcism were convinced that there was something powerful and different about this Jesus.

This is one of several stories in the Gospels in which Jesus casts out demons. As I said last week, such a story is not served by wondering what kind of a demon it was or did Jesus really do that. Instead, we can hear these stories as a way of talking about what ails humanity, whether it be sickness, madness, greed, violence, or fear and know that Jesus sees the presence of such demons as incompatible with how God intends us to be. His casting out of demons gave notice that change was coming. He restored those who have been inhabited by such evil so that we might have hope of the restoration of all of the sons and daughters of Eden.

The next logical step in this understanding is that the ongoing work of casting out the demons from human society falls to those who have committed themselves to follow Jesus and those who regularly celebrate his presence. That would be us, the church as the Body of Christ. That would be us, the Body of Christ with the red doors on the Branford Green. And since this is our Annual Meeting Sunday, it’s a good time to ask, “how are we doing with that?” It’s a rather large question so let’s break it down. If we are modeling Christ, let’s start with who this Jesus is.

He is the revelation of God, meaning that if we know Jesus and understanding what he was doing, like casting out humanity’s demons, then we understand a lot about God and what God wants. Therefore, Trinity Church is meant to be a place that also reveals God. Starting with the ringing of our bell and the opening of our doors, the joyful noise of worship, we do signal to Branford that this is a place for seeking God. The community outside has been observing how we reveal God in the world through our expanded outreach. This congregation has provided funds for Outreach and supported extra initiatives. The 100 Thanksgiving dinners that we put on tables around Branford says a lot about what God wants. God wants to bless people with

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healthy families and good food and the means to celebrate. Those who work diligently to provide food for struggling families in Branford saw something new this year from Trinity. Those turkeys and all the fixings were an expression of abundance, freely given. In true Jesus form, Trinity led the way and others followed into generosity. Relationships within the community were strengthened and joy happened. God's desire for blessings to be shared was fulfilled in November and not only then but every week as canned vegetables, peanut butter, and Dinty Moore stew make their way to the baskets in the back of the church. We live out God's intention in the faithful Trinity team that cooks and serves dinner at Columbus House and the hours spent gathering and organizing Angel Tree Christmas gifts for children who otherwise would not have received a gift from their incarcerated parents. The demons of hunger and cold and invisibility were, if not cast out, at least challenged, by this congregation and our growing Outreach Ministry.

Jesus brought a new experience of God to those who followed him and it was never more apparent than when he taught them to pray saying "Our Father." Empowering people to know that they too had access to God, without the intermediary temple priests and blood sacrifice was a reorganization of people spiritual lives. Empowerment has been one of the most wonderful and visible aspects of life at Trinity in 2011. The Council of Ministries hit the ground running just a year ago the things that have been accomplished are enough to leave you breathless. For the first time in Trinity's history, lay lead ministries are empowered to create, organize and carry out projects and programs. Each ministry also has control over its own budget. The Vestry, having approved the annual budget and the allotments for each ministry has trust in the dedicated parish members who have committed themselves to the task. Earlier this month, for the first time ever, the Chairs of the Ministries came together and helped to craft the budget, each one presenting their budget needs and projections for the next year. It was a quiet but huge moment in the development of an empowered congregation. As we pray "Our Father" we also accept responsibilities for the mission and ministry of this congregation.

One of the things that scandalized Jesus' critics was his insistence on open table fellowship with the whole spectrum of humanity. He dined with the rich and powerful and with the outcasts of society. He fed the hungry. He had barrier breaking conversations with Samaritan women and gave his time to children. A most satisfying scene, repeated throughout 2011, was people venturing through our red doors and being surprised by the hospitality with which they were met. Dinner after the storm, a cup of cool water on a hot summer night, hot cider and Christmas cookies served with a smile at no charge. The doors were open and the lights were on at Trinity whenever we could find a reason to do it and to invite our neighbors to come inside. There was a boy in a wheelchair at most of the concerts and after his first trip in to see the church, he insisted on coming back every Thursday evening to revisit the beauty and the peace. It was lovely.

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The hallmark of Jesus earthly ministry was self-giving and sacrificial love so that we would learn what that looks like and that it leads to freedom and strength. He lived for others and thus we inherit the challenge to do the same. Now, I have seen the numbers from our fall pledge campaign and you will hear soon the extent to which this congregation rose to the challenge to increase our Outreach budget. It's worth some applause. When you willingly sacrifice your treasure to help others, you reveal Christ to those who will be helped. When you put aside anxiety that comes from thinking "do I have enough?" and replace it with, "how can I share what I have been given?" you embody the abundance of God's love. There is still work to do in this area, but then there always will be. You will always discover something new and have to decide how much of it was meant for you and how much was meant for sharing.

Jesus, the living Word, is the example of God's imagination in our midst. The distance between him and us is the room available for spiritual growth. So we Trinity Church, share the words of our faith in scripture and song and in silence, always listening for that still small voice that invites us deeper and deeper into the mystery of God. We are a work in progress, setting our sights on the work giving to us to do – in the world and inside of our hearts.

Isn't it great?!

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