

Kay F. Albury-Pierce

Casting Out Demons

About 10 years ago, I was very excited about preaching a sermon entitled, "Casting Out Demons." Oh, just the words sounded powerful. It looked good on the outside marquee! It was in vogue with strong biblical language. Found in Mark's Gospel, it was based on that week's lectionary reading. As I prepared the sermon, consulted commentaries and other reliable resources, I was to soon discover that I was not prepared for the true challenge that this sermon would bring. For this would be the first time as pastor that right at the "Invitation to Christian Discipleship,"



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my hand would be called. Yes, my hand that I use when I preach, gesturing to make a point or non-verbally communicating a thought. Yes, my hand that I use to invite those who worship to come forward for prayer or to dare come forward to give their lives to Christ.

He was an African-American man, in his late twenties perhaps early thirties. As he walked down the center aisle, accepting the invitation to give his life to Christ, little was I prepared for what came next. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "I am possessed with seven demons. Can you cast them out?"

Never in my life had I imagined such a confrontation. Why? Because I had never experienced any great dialogue around the subject before. What demons, I asked myself, was this man talking about? And even if I knew who they were, surely my seminary had never offered a course on casting them out.

So, I decided to explore this challenge a little further and asked the young man to meet me in my office immediately after church. In the moments before our

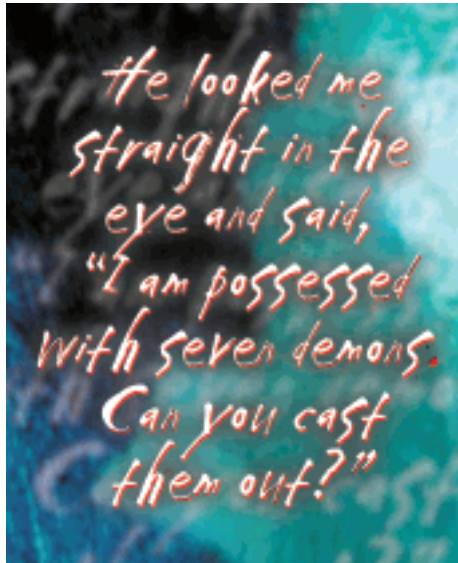
meeting, my spirit was troubled because I felt ashamed, embarrassed, and powerless. I didn't have a clue as to how to "cast out his demons." One thing I did know was that I wasn't going to try. I remembered a scene in the movie *The Exorcist*, and God knew that I had no experience at this at all.

When the young man arrived, I invited him in. Pulling out paper and pen, I began our conversation as I would any crisis intervention session, getting basic information, name, address, etcetera. One of my next questions was, "How do you know that you are possessed with demons?" The young man explained that the demons were the voices that he heard; voices that wouldn't stop talking to him. He went on to say that the only time they were silent were the times that he was institutionalized and given medicine. And he had been institutionalized many times. Presently, he was living alone but he was not taking his medicine. Furthermore, he was "hearing those voices again."

He went on to say that as he was walk-

ing past the church, he saw the sermon title on the outer board. He specifically came to church on that day to get his demons "casted out." The hard questions for me were then whether I preached what I believed and could I practice what I preached? The only answer I had that day was, "I believe, but right now I'm not willing to practice, explore, or risk my belief in the conventional way of exorcism." And I did not have a clue what that entailed.

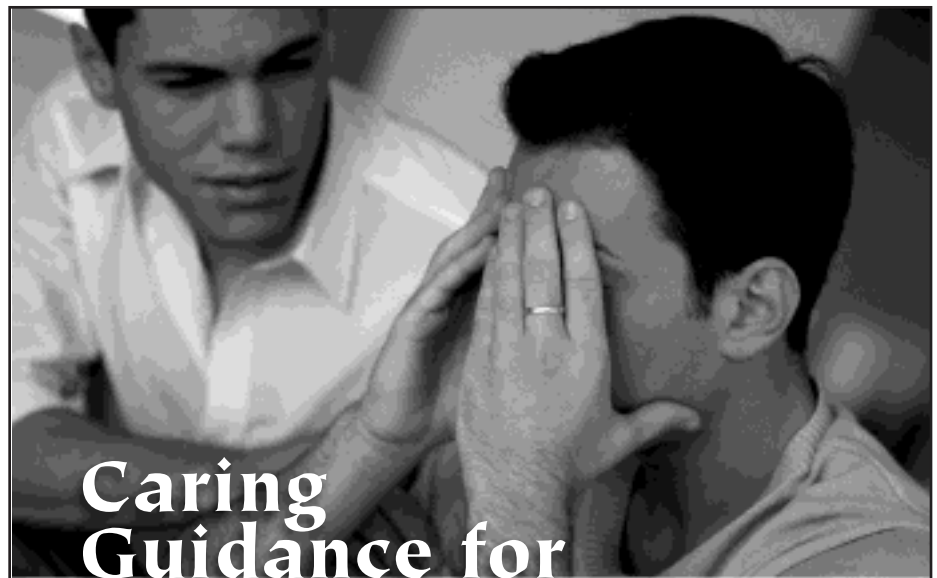
I did refer the young man to two



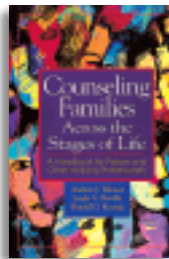
Roman Catholic priests in the neighborhood with whom I had become friends. And I did offer a strong prayer of healing for the young man. Also, I seriously recommended that he take his medicine and see his doctors immediately. Finally, I confessed to him that I had no experience in casting out demons.

Ten years have past since that day. I have not seen the young man since. But what I have seen has been just as painful. I have seen members of my church struggling with demons that give voice to drug and alcohol abuse. I have prayed with them and their families. I have seen the pain of church members with demons that give voice to Schizophrenia and Manic-Depressive episodes (bi-polar disorders.)

I have had the privilege of speaking during annual celebrations at the "early-bird" Narcotics Anonymous group that meets five days a week in our lower auditorium. But more than speak, I have heard many speak courageously of their on-going struggle with demons that are multi-generational. These demons give birth to vicious cycles of poverty, jobless-



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ness, homelessness, hopelessness, violence, crime, addiction, incarceration, illiteracy, poor health care, early teenage parenting. Often the church seems to be powerless to make a real difference.

One of my goals for the next five years is to identify strategic places in our church community to begin the conversation on mental illness. From the pulpit this time I will be more prepared for the voices that have been given too much power to speak and for too long have

been the only voices speaking. If anyone should ever again come forward, I'd be able to say, "Yes, I believe that I can, with the power of Christ, cast your demons out because I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Meet me in my office where we can talk about your faith, your on-going struggle, and together with trained church members and a network of other professionals, we can cast your demons out, without a doubt!" □