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Gospel Challenges

The Gospels are reflections of the meaning Jesus had in the lives of early believers. What does this gospel reading tell us about Jesus? It tells us quiet clearly that Jesus shared his power and gifts with others. Our gifts are given to us. That is what a gift is – something with which we are graced, something that we didn't earn ourselves. It is something that we cultivate with gratitude because that is the best way to show that we are thankful. Because we are gifted, we cannot claim our talents as our own. We are to grace others with whatever it is that we have been given.

I believe that we all probably underestimate the extent that we have been gifted. We become used to our giftedness and take it for granted. Let's take a few moments and remember our so called "ordinary" gifts. We have the gift of Jesus himself who never turns his face from us; who always lures us to come closer, to know him as a real person who cares for us more, even, than our parents, our best friend or our spouse. This is an extraordinary gift.

We have been gifted with friendship. How would we get through life without our friends? They are there for us to celebrate with, to mourn with, and to share our deepest thoughts with. We might say that friends embody the presence of Jesus for us. And that means that we embody the presence of Jesus to them. Everything is connected.

The Twelve were sent out to preach and to cure people, especially those possessed by demons. There is no consistent understanding about who or what the demons are. We do know, however, that those afflicted by demons were prevented from acting like their ordinary selves. People probably avoided them. What or who may we consider demons today – those who prevent us from acting from the center of our beings? The one that leaps foremost to my mind is consumerism. Consumerism is so prevalent that we don't even know we are infected by it. It is like the air we breathe. It is one of the foundations upon which free-market capitalism is built. If we don't consume, the market doesn't grow. It's not capitalism that is bad; it is unbridled capitalism that seeks to get the greatest return for the least amount. The goal is to keep wages down and profits high.

We know, however, that many people's difficulties are cured by relationship, with someone who cares for them. This covers a wide range of possibilities, therapists, spouses, parents, friends, clergy. Employers would pay a fair wage. Relationship is offered by Jesus. We strengthen this relationship and make it real in prayer.

Another of our contemporary demons is human trafficking. It is appalling to think of humans as objects to be bartered. This reveals a demon completely devoid of the influence of relationship. And what about our unfair school systems which are supported by property taxes? The ones with the most money receive the best education. How does that better anything? It certainly is not that you wish less than the best for those who have the best. What would that accomplish? But how do we foster better education, a superior education for those who have less?

The ecological crisis, so eloquently written about by our Pope Francis, is another of our demons. Instead of considering the earth our home, we have come to consider it the source of consumer goods. It is not that we are bad people; it is that we are thoughtless people. We forget that the earth is our home and that when the earth and nature flourish, we flourish, but especially the poor flourish. We've spoken about this in our parish, and the readers of *Clear Water* are studying and conversing about it.

The message of Jesus is trustworthy. That is why the apostles were sent out with nothing. The message of Jesus himself is enough. In that we can trust. The message convinces because when we live by it, we know that we live better, more carefree lives, lives that are marked by interior peace even in the midst of difficulties and tragedies.

Because the message of Jesus is trustworthy, Jesus instructs the apostle to stay with the townspeople, to appreciate their hospitality and to remain where they are received, not to try to obtain better accommodations. They are at the service of the Word, which is proven by their power over the demons. If they were not received in a particular town, they were not to point fingers or cause turmoil or cause strife. They were simply to leave and, symbolically, to shake the dust from their feet, a non-violent action, and go on to the next town.

The Twelve were sent out two by two. They did not have to do it alone. They had support and companionship. They could discuss between themselves what the message of Jesus meant and how best to share it with others. Community is essential to the message of Jesus. Jesus surrounded himself with a community of men and women. We come to worship together because we believe in the strength of community in which we supply for one another's weaknesses and reinforce the strengths of one another. One of my favorite parts of the liturgy is watching others in line to receive communion when I say to myself. My life is bound to every one of these people. It is very humbling but also invigorating to know that.

The Gospels are not just a look into the past. They are a challenge to live the life of Christ, now. We are called to preach repentance and cast out demons and cure sick people. In today's world we can preach – in various ways – about the dangers of consumerism, of ecological mindlessness, of human trafficking. In this way, we, too, receiving authority from Christ will be casting out demons and curing the sick.