

I confess that when I first read our Gospel reading for this evening, my reaction was, *what in the name of God am I going to say about that?* But in time, thinking about the passage, praying about what to say, and reading some commentaries, I began to see our reading this evening as making two very important and closely related points. Two points that may not be terribly apparent on first encounter. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible verses 43 through 45 have the subtitle *The Return of the Unclean Spirit* while verses 46 through 50 have the subtitle *The True Kindred of Jesus*. The subtitles give no clue to the connection between the two sections of the reading.

Like many passages, context is critical to understanding. Chapter 12 of Matthew's Gospel begins with the Pharisees challenging Jesus because his disciples have been seen plucking heads of grain to eat on the sabbath. Jesus replies to the Pharisees recounting how in 1st Samuel 21: 1 – 6, David in the absence of any other food, begs for the bread of the presence from Ahimelech, the priest. Ahimelech recognizes the need and provides the Holy Bread to David and his companions. Jesus concludes his reply with *I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.*" Chapter 12 continues with on going tension between Jesus and the Pharisees. In verse 14 we read: *But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.* And in verses 34 through 37 *You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*" Finally just before our passage, in verses 38 through 40: *Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.*

In verses 43, 44, and 45 Jesus tells a parable to make the point that while the removal of an unclean spirit may well have the promise of healthfulness, removal is not sufficient in itself. A person from whom an unclean spirit has been banished is like an empty house already swept and put in order. But such a house is an easy home for demons, some many times more powerful than the original demon that was cast out. A house and an individual, for whom Jesus uses the house as a symbol, can only be protected from demons if the house and the person are full of the Holy Spirit. Jesus concludes his parable with *Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So will it be also with this evil generation.*"

HOMILY FOR WEDNESDAY, MAY 27TH, 2026 – MATTHEW 12: 43 - 50

Had the Pharisees, the scribes, and the priests seen Jesus as the Messiah things would have been very different. But Jesus did not fill the bill for their concept of a Messiah. They expected the Messiah to be a great leader who would deliver Israel from its oppressors in a great military victory. In the absence of such a victory, they could only see Jesus as a misguided prophetic figure – one of many – who did not observe the law with the rigour expected of a religious figure.

It is important to remember that the Gospel of Matthew was written sometime between the years 75 and 90 of the Common Era. So this prediction of seven other spirits more evil than the first evil spirit is not really a prediction. It is a statement of truth. In the year 66 of the common era, there was a major Jewish revolt against Rome. By 70 the Romans had completely destroyed Jerusalem including the Temple. On again off again revolts continued until the early 130's which resulted in the final deportation of all Jews from Palestine – thus the beginning of the Great Diaspora.

Our reading continues with a story that often shocks readers in Jesus' apparent rejection of his earthly family, but such a reaction misses the point of the passage. Jesus is saying that everyone can be his family, *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*

On this 4th day after we celebrated the major Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came like a rushing wind and descended on the followers of Jesus, we are asked by this reading to evaluate the state of our own house, so-to-speak. Are we like the Pharisees entirely intent on observing every jot and tittle of the law absolutely without error, but unable to see the work of the Holy Spirit all around us? Are we like an empty house beautifully swept in complete order, but spiritually empty and open and susceptible to every evil spirit that might come along? Or are we full of the Holy Spirit only eager to follow the Spirit's leading in all we do?

If we are honest I suspect we might all say that we try for the third option, but we fall into the other two with unfortunate regularity. Pentecost was not a single discrete event. The Holy Spirit is with us all the time, if we are open to her presence and power. You may recall that on the Sunday before the Ascension our passage from the Gospel of John included Jesus saying, *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.* The Advocate is one who is along side. The Advocate is the Holy Spirit and she is with us always. But to remain alive to the Spirit's working amongst us is not always easy, and that is why it is so important that we are part of a Christian family united not by genetics but by a shared commitment to Christ. In such a family we find strength when we are weak and we provide strength to others when they are in need. The more we are united in the family of Christ, the more we will be alive to the Spirit and ready and willing to follow the Spirit's lead.

Thanks be to God, Amen.