

SERMON on the Healing of the Epileptic, Matthew 17:14-23

The man who approaches the Lord today might seem humble, kneeling and asking for help. But he speaks rudely, saying “Your disciples could not cast out the demon from my son.” It is rude and unseemly to publicly broadcast the weaknesses of others. If he was truly humble and if he had a strong faith, he would only have asked Jesus for help and left it at that. It is true that the faith of the apostles at this juncture was still weak and being perfected, but Jesus did not want his apostles discredited in the eyes of the people. The apostles were being prepared as the future leaders of the church. Jesus would pass the baton to them and they would then continue the work that Jesus began, which is to bring salvation to mankind. Therefore, in order to protect their integrity, Jesus cites the lack of faith of not only this man but of everyone else as well, in order not to offend the man alone. In reality, it is more because of the father’s lack of faith than the lack of faith of the apostles that the demon could not be cast out. Everything depends upon our faith. The boy was cast into the fire and into the water, yet God put a curb on the demon and would not let the demon completely destroy the boy. If the demon had free reign, he would not only have destroyed the boy but the father as well. After Jesus frees the boy from the demon, the disciples come to Jesus privately and ask why they could not cast out the demon. They have anxiety and fear that they have lost the grace with which they had been entrusted. For they had received power against unclean spirits (Matthew 10:1). Jesus tells them that it is because of their unbelief. It must have stung them when Jesus says that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains, because a mustard seed is very tiny and small. Jesus is intimating that their faith is so weak, that it is even less than a mustard seed in size. Although a mustard seed may be small, contained within a mustard seed is great power. Mustard bushes reach an average mature height of between 6 and 20 feet with a 20-foot spread. Exceptional plants can reach 30 feet tall under ideal conditions. The disciples were still being formed and taught by the Lord. It is only after the Crucifixion that they came to full maturity in faith and understanding. Only after seeing the Cross do all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place in their minds. When they behold Jesus hanging on the Cross, their lack of understanding turns into understanding, as if a curtain had been pulled away from their eyes. Jesus doesn’t stop with moving mountains when He reveals the power of faith. He adds, “Nothing will be impossible for you.” This does not mean that mature faith acts willy nilly and according to whim. Mature faith acts when there is a need and when the act is expedient for salvation. The foundation is laid down right here by our Lord that in order to avoid becoming possessed by a demon, it is necessary first that we pray, and secondly, that our prayer be accompanied by fasting. And if for some reason, perhaps a medical reason, we cannot fast, that does not preclude our ability to pray. Nothing is mightier, says St. John Chrysostom, than a man or woman who prays sincerely. In addition, if for some reason we cannot fast, this does not preclude that we can avoid luxurious living. Casting out luxury is equal to controlling the belly. Evil spirits love nothing more than luxurious living and overindulging in food or drink. In American history, temperance societies convinced our political leaders to enact prohibition laws. It was believed that making wine and beer illegal would stop the debauchery of drunkenness. Such a notion could not be further from the truth. So the wine itself was blamed for drunkenness, and not the man or woman who chooses to overindulge. Wine and alcohol is not considered sinful or evil by the Church or by Christianity. Wine is used for the Holy Eucharist, and even St. Paul recommends a little wine for stomach ailments. Therefore, wine is not sinful. It is the deliberate choice to over indulge that is the sin. If a man or woman were to kill someone with a hammer, do we blame the hammer? Do we make it illegal to produce or sell hammers? St. John Chrysostom points out the incongruence of this way of thinking when he says that we might as well say “let’s abolish the production of steel, then no weapons can be made and then there can be no murders, let’s get rid of the nighttime, then no crimes can be committed in the dark. Where do we stop with such a way of thinking? Ultimately we will say, let’s just get rid of everything, including people too, because it is people who get drunk and kill and commit sins.” Our great father and teacher St. John even says that such logic is of

a satanical mind. It is a general notion that all excess is harmful to the soul and in all things we should show moderation. For example, if we are prone to drunkenness, then whatever good we may have achieved, whether it be temperance, modesty, understanding, meekness, humility, kindheartedness, if drunkenness finds it, it will cast it all into the sea. Drunkenness also leads to unreasonable despondencies, madness, infirmity, ridicule and reproach. St. John Chrysostom says, "What manner of excuse is there for them that pierce themselves through with so many evils? There is none. Let us fly then from that pest, that we may attain both unto the good things here, and unto those to come, by the grace and love towards mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might with the Father and the Holy Spirit, unto the ages of ages. Amen."