

It's a scary thought, isn't it—identity theft? Your identity—*who* you are and *what* you have—taken away and assumed by somebody else. Just this week, some person created an email account with my name on it—Pastor David Miller—and posed as me to request a wire transfer from our bookkeeper Sig. Can you believe it? Apparently, identity theft is the fastest-growing crime in the US. Five years ago in 2013, someone became a victim of identity theft every two minutes. That's 13.1 million people—just think what it is today!

I came across an article from 2014, when Forbes interviewed Amy Krebs, who was just such a victim. In February 2013, she came home after work one Friday evening and received a phone call from a major credit card company. Amy came to find out that someone had tried to obtain a credit card using her name, address, and social security number—and the company was calling to confirm that Amy had indeed signed up for the card. After she hung up Amy was shaken up—this person had all of her personal information, could wreak havoc on her credit, and God knows what else!

She eventually went to Equifax, Experian, and Transunion, and quickly found that she couldn't get to two of her reports because this other person had infiltrated her credit history to the point that their information overrode Amy's. "I can't even tell you what that felt like," Amy said. It was "like someone had taken over my life" Later, she learned that this person had been using her information for six months, and they had attempted to open up more than fifty accounts in Amy's name. "I couldn't keep up with [this person]. [They're] out there calling, trying to get credit and then I'm finding out about it." When Amy got her credit report, she even found a medical collections agency—"That one scares me more than any of them—to think [they] utilized my Social Security number to get medical attention. That's a whole other realm. It's a different animal." After sharing the rest of her story, Amy finally concluded—"It's the most time-consuming, upsetting, emotional event you have to go through. Somebody went in and so easily removed my information and had their information override mine on this all important, encompassing document—my credit report." Just imagine if it happened to you.

But perhaps there's an even scarier thought than identity theft. What if instead of being stripped of who *you* are, somebody else forced *their* identity on you. Not only on paper did their information override yours, but even their thoughts, their words, their actions overrode your own. They just come in and take over, getting behind the wheel of you—and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it!

I wonder if that's what makes the movie *The Exorcist* so scary—not just that there's some monster, but that *you* become that monster. Any of us who have seen that movie will never forget that possessed little girl contorting her body, speaking in that demonic voice, and screaming obscenities. Well, something like that's what we found in today's Gospel—here's a man, we're not told anything about *him*—who *he* is—but only that he hasn't quite been himself lately. Sure, it's *his* mouth, *his* tongue, *his* vocal cords speaking, but it's not actually *him* doing the talking. And as this story was unfolding before us, maybe the thought that this isn't just some Hollywood movie script, but actual true events, was enough to terrify us.

Now, one thing that's always been reassuring to me whenever we come across such stories in the Bible is that this doesn't happen to people *inside* the Church. No, this kinda thing only happens to those *outside* the Church—it happens when they play with black magic and witchcraft and Ouija boards—but not people like us. Then came a movie called *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, which blew that theory out of the water. What made that movie so different from other demon-possession movies was that the college-age girl who was possessed was herself a practicing Roman Catholic. Interestingly enough, look where this demoniac is in today's Gospel—the synagogue. This guy's one of us—he's inside the church—yet he has a demon. Folks, this is a game changer—it means none of us is safe.

So, how does this happen? Those of us who are filled with the Holy Spirit have a No Vacancy sign in the window, right? There's just no room for other spirits, is there? Don't get me wrong, this is certainly the case. Please don't go home

fearing that you might get possessed without warning at any second. It just doesn't work like that—you and I are not Emily Rose, and that *was* just some Hollywood script.

*However*, think about this. Dylan opened his eyes—*where am I?* He glanced around, there were bars in front of him, there was a toilet out in the open in the corner to the right of him, and the seat he was laying on was a firm, hard bunk—Dylan was in a prison cell. His next thought was, *how did I get here?* He tried to press rewind in his mind and go backwards through the events of his day. He was groggy, but eventually it came to him—*oh yeah*, he remembered, *I got in a fight with a cop when he arrested me for breaking into a car. I was trying to get some money—for food 'cuz I was hungry, but most of all, for some more dope. Ah yeah . . . dope*—a large smile spread across Dylan's lips.

See, had you asked Dylan three years ago if he'd be in the slammer today, he would've thought you were nuts. He held a good job, had met a nice girl—it was she who'd introduced him to marijuana. It seemed harmless at first, just a fun thing to do now and again. But then, now and again turned into more often than not. And the crowd he started hanging with encouraged him to get bigger and better highs. Now, he was into heroin—and it had taken him over. It was all he ever thought about, all he ever wanted, it drove everything he did. And that's what got him where he was today.

Let that be a little parable for us—nobody wants to become a demoniac, but eventually it happens. Just a little bit of sin here and little bit there—it's not so bad, it'll be okay—and finally, like Dylan, we wonder *how did I get here?* That's the way evil works—remember how the serpent slowly lured Adam and Eve into complacency and then BAM! all hell broke loose. You give evil an inch and it's sure to take a mile, which is why we in the church take sin so seriously—we love you too much not to. You can bet that once the devil gets a foot in the door, he won't have much trouble getting it the rest of the way open. And that's how something like today's Gospel can happen—even in the synagogue!

Maybe you know what it's like for evil to run your life. Maybe you know how it can all too easily define you. Maybe you know the way it seems to come in and take over. While I know most of us aren't exactly like the man in today's Gospel, at the same time, I wonder if there aren't some of us who honestly aren't much different. After all, who of us doesn't struggle against certain sins that have a real hold on us? Who of us doesn't wrestle at times with all-consuming guilt? Who of us doesn't have a hard time differentiating ourselves from the bad things that we've done? And if that's you, like it is me, you're frightened—who's going to shake this devil off our backs?

That must've been what this poor possessed man in our Gospel story was wondering. *Who will get rid of this darkness inside of me?* But this man's answer is also your answer and mine. The same Jesus who isn't afraid of evil but stands up to it, who looks right into the face of the demoniac and declares, "Be silent, come out of him!" is the same Jesus who also does this for each one of us.

Maybe you never thought about church this way before, but every Sunday is a sort of exorcism. Here you come every week, and you make confession. Spitting out your sins, confessing them, it's as if Jesus is casting them out of you. By Confession, your demons come flying out, and you know where they land? Jesus.

Watch Him in the gospels and you'll see that it's in Jesus that evil and darkness and devils find a host. Taking on our sicknesses and diseases, bearing our sins, they have their way with Jesus. And at the moment of the cross it looks as if they've done their worst—darkness spreads over the land, Jesus hangs cursed on a tree, He's forsaken by God. But let me point out a couple important words in today's Gospel. It says that when Jesus has victory over the demon and casts it out, "the unclean spirit *convulsed* the man and *cried out* with a loud voice." "Convulse" and "cry out with a loud voice"—later in Mark's gospel we'll hear those words again.

As the forces of evil and the powers of darkness seem to corrupt and overcome Jesus on the cross, Mark tells us that "With a loud cry"—"a *loud cry*"—"Jesus breathed His last." And then right after that, Mark says that "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom"—the same Greek word for "convulse" is again used to say that the temple curtain was "torn." Could it be that what Mark's trying to make clear is that it's not Jesus or any of us who's done for, but it's Satan who doesn't stand a chance! That as Jesus bears the world's demons on the cross, as He lets out a loud cry, as the temple curtain is convulsed in two, it is actually hell's last gasp? Oh yes, that has to be what Mark is saying,

because three days later Mark shows us Jesus in all His shining glory standing victorious, risen from the dead! Which means Jesus stands victorious over all of our demons.

Today, if you feel like you haven't been yourself lately, if instead it feels like sin has imposed itself on you, Jesus is here to bring you back. With His forgiveness, with His grace, with His love, Jesus comes to take the happy ending at the end of today's Gospel and to make it yours. I love that one scene close to the end of the movie *Blood Diamond*, perhaps you've seen it. It's a movie about a Mende fisherman and a mercenary-turned smuggler during the Sierra Leone civil war in 1999. They're on a quest to find a rare pink diamond, each hoping it will change their life, and finally, they're both at the site where the precious diamond is buried. The Mende fisherman's son, Dia, is back with them, after having been kidnapped by the rebel faction and forced into being a child soldier. And as the smuggler finds the diamond and digs it out, he looks up and finds that he's being held at gunpoint. Only thing is, it's Dia, the fisherman's son, who's holding the gun.

See, back during Dia's time with the rebel faction, he had been brainwashed to hate his father and now they were in Dia's brain to make him do bad things. It is at this moment, when the boy seems possessed, that his father says to him compassionately, "Dia, what are you doing? Look at me, what are you doing? You are Dia Vandy. Of the proud Mende tribe." Dia now points the gun at his father.

His father continues, "You are a good boy who loves soccer and school. Your mother loves you so much. She waits by the fire making plantains and red palm oil stew with your sister . . . and the new baby." Now tears are running down his father's cheeks, "The cows wait for you. And Babu, the wild dog who minds no one but you." Tears are now running down Dia's cheeks too. "I know they made you do bad things, but you are not a bad boy. I am your father, who loves you. And you will come home with me and be my son again." At this, Dia drops the gun, and he and his father embrace.

No matter what's possessed you to sin, today God reminds you of *who* you really are. In liturgy and song, in Word and Sacrament, in Holy Absolution, listen to Him—He's talking to you. "What are you doing?" He asks. "Look at Me, what are you doing? You are My child," He says, "Of our proud heavenly family. You are a good boy, a good girl. All of us love you so much. We wait for you to come back. We all wait for you. I know they made you do bad things, but you are not bad. I am God your Father, who loves you. And you will come home with me and be my child again."