

You might remember the sitcom “Parks and Recreation,” where the curmudgeonly Ron Swanson serves as the head of the department that the show is named for. It seems incongruous that the government-hating Swanson would work for the very institution he hates, until he explains his ambition to work his way up to the position of City Manager... where he would be able to eliminate the department of Parks and Recreation.

The show’s tone is lighthearted, and the character is endearing, but the idea that the best way to weaken an entity is to turn it against itself is deadly serious, and time-tested. From children who play their parents off each other, to churches that are distressed by internal conflict, to nation-states stirring the pot of division in their rivals, it’s a proven strategy. It works in part because it plays to a key human weakness: we are so determined to believe in our own righteousness that we are reluctant to consider anything larger. Principles, strategy, the greater good, even reason itself are no match for the allure of getting our way, confirming our opinions, and putting ourselves in the place of God.

So when God became one of us, Jesus, he knew what he was up against. Just by helping people, Jesus made enemies. They thought they had him cornered, but they only managed to embarrass themselves. They were so determined to discredit Jesus that they claimed he was in league with evil, when Jesus had become famous for casting out evil. He must have realized they were desperate to discredit him because their allegations were not only false, but nonsensical. If they had been rational, they would have been celebrating what Jesus was doing.

Fortunately, Jesus is not only love incarnate, but also wisdom incarnate. He recognized that his enemies’ hostility was nothing personal, even though they expressed it in very personal ways. He saw through the antagonism and recognized the underlying fears: fear of the unknown, fear of change, fear of loss of position and power. So Jesus had to point out their irrationality. Since, as scribes, their entire justification for being was based on a reputation of rationality, this did not go over well, all the more so because they had brought it on themselves.

Apparently, giving the devil credit for what God was doing was a big problem in those days. It doesn’t seem to be a problem now, so I wouldn’t worry too much about committing an unforgivable sin. Although we often condemn people who think differently from us, and write them off as insane, or even evil. Which can feel great for a moment, but taken to its logical confusion, results in a very lonely life. Which is why it’s so important to cultivate a habit of thanking and praising God for all the wonderful things God gives us and does for us. God doesn’t need anything from us, but worshipping God is good for us. Nothing else is more powerfully unifying.

Back with the scribes, Jesus looked beyond the immediate conflict and identified a teachable moment. He said, “No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.”

“To rob the house of a strong, powerful, man would require a stronger, more powerful man,” Chris Haslam points out. “John the Baptizer has called Jesus ‘more powerful,’ so Jesus speaks of himself: he is beginning to eliminate Satan.”* And at this point in his ministry, he is doing that one house, one soul, at a time, in order to reveal who he is, and to foreshadow his final, cosmic victory over all forms of evil.

While I do believe that sentient, supernatural evil is real, I’ve never seen any evidence of demonic possession firsthand. However, we all have seen souls in the grip of terrible forces: despair, terror, depression, wrath, lust, greed, vanity, self-righteousness, denial. Many of us have wrestled with one or more of them. I know I have. Sometimes they break in, and sometimes they charm their way in, looking so appealing that we choose to welcome them, though we should know better. They are strong, and if they get a foothold in our houses, they can bind us and wreak havoc. Yet this story shows us the hope of an alternative, which promises security, and the way to achieve that alternative.

The house where Jesus is staying is besieged, yet secure. The people standing outside don’t understand what he’s doing, but they are trying to control him. Yet Jesus is in control, though chaos swirls just outside. The house is united in Jesus, by Jesus. It was literally the house of God, and it attracted critics, and the curious, and the faithful, all because Jesus was there. Every church should be like that house, both a place of healing and refuge, and a place that attracts the sort of controversy that Jesus attracted. Being centered on Jesus isn’t always easy, and it’s never automatic — being Christ-centered is a choice — and painful experience shows that churches that do not unite in Jesus begin to fall apart. Likewise, every soul should welcome Jesus, the stronger man who can bind up and cast out the forces that seek to sabotage us from within.

Welcoming Jesus into our souls begins with baptism, the joyful moment when we celebrate God’s unconditional love and welcome a new soul into the New Covenant, the grace of God made available through Jesus. “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother,” he said, so in the baptismal rite, we promise to stay faithful. With baptism, we become part of Jesus’s family, and the Eucharist sustains this sacred, life-giving relationship.

We may know from experience that not every family member makes for a good house guest, but Jesus does. He will not force his way upon us, or make himself the center of attention. If we choose another way, if we choose to make other things more important than Jesus, he will respect our choice. And we will suffer, not because God punishes us — no, God always loves us; never forget that Jesus came and died and rose *to save sinners*. Rather, we will suffer for the simple reason that, as appealing as they may seem, the other things we might choose don’t love us. They don’t have our best interests at heart. In the end, one way or another, the promises of the world will prove to be empty. Only God’s promises, God’s grace and love, endure forever.

St. Paul talks about our bodies as “the earthly tent we live in,” and how even if it’s destroyed, “we have a building from God.” And it’s true that we will enjoy everlasting life in heaven. But I also believe that the more faithfully we follow Jesus in this life, the less we will resemble tents, and the more we will resemble “a building of God,” perhaps even a strong tower, a place that cannot be shaken by hostility and fear, a place where others might find refuge and healing, a place that fosters unity, and gives the world hope.

*<http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/bpr10m.shtml>