

Demoniacs have names: A challenge for ministry

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

Members of the stewardship committee have arrived. They grab cups of coffee and join me around a table. There's some chatter about summer vacations, and then we're off and running through a familiar discussion about this year's campaign. That's when I notice that Jean MacBride seems distracted.

She sits in her familiar light blue cashmere cardigan sweater, her reading glasses hanging from a thin black woven cord around her neck, her gray-streaked hair pulled back into an efficient bun. She is as proper as always. But tonight her face is completely blank, as if she doesn't dare reveal anything. She says nothing but studies her committee papers, none of which could possibly be that interesting.

"What's up with Jean?" I wonder.

The folks around this table don't need my advice about the same stewardship program we've rolled out year after year under different banners and slogans. What they do need is for a pastor to be at the table—someone who pays close attention to what they say, what God says, and what they are trying to say to each other.

This is why years ago some pastors and elders laid hands on me—so that I would one day sit at a committee meeting and wonder, "What's up with Jean?"

I've known Jean since I began serving as the pastor of this congregation seven years ago. Her husband, Bill, a retired engineer, is not as involved in our ministry as she is, but he usually joins her in worship. They live quietly. A couple of months ago my wife and I went to their discreetly appointed condominium for dinner. Occasionally their daughter and her family from San Francisco join them for the Christmas Eve worship services. Their life appears as normal as normal ever gets.

When we've finished stewardship business, I reach over to ask Jean, "Are you OK?"

"Oh, I probably shouldn't have come tonight," she responds. "But I thought it would be good for me to get out of the house. I'm OK," she says as her eyes began to glisten. I look around for an abandoned napkin on the table to give her.

Then she asks, “What do you think about demons?”

I thought I was ready for whatever Jean was going to tell me. Disease, divorce, loneliness, unfulfilling work, theological doubts—these are the issues I wade through with my parishioners. But demons?

“Why are you worried about demons?” I ask.

“My son is not doing well. He’s off his meds again.”

“Jean, I didn’t even know you had a son.”

“We don’t talk about him much. Jeffrey—that’s his name—has had a hard life. He’s been in and out of psychiatric hospitals for a very long time, maybe ten years. He hears voices. It’s a type of schizophrenia that keeps pulling him down into this horrible place where we can’t reach him.” After a short pause, she goes on. “But lately things have become even worse.” Then she succumbs to the deep sobs that rise only from a mother’s soul.

Eventually she is able to continue: “Jeffrey lives in Atlanta. Two days ago the police arrested him when he disrupted a church service. He was carrying a butcher knife! I know he would never use it. At least, that’s what Bill and I tell ourselves.”

“Oh, Jean.”

“After they arrested him they took him to another psych hospital where he was committed for 30 days. If his doctor hadn’t called us, we would never have known. He has an apartment, and a dog that could’ve starved to death. Bill is there now.” There was another long pause. “It’s horrible. Something evil has grabbed hold of our son.”

That night I did what pastors do. I listened to the story. I assured Jean of God’s love for her family and of the power of our great hope for healing. I told her that church members would do anything they could, and I offered to speak further with her and Bill about this. And I prayed.

As I drove home that evening, I thought about the people on the margins of our own congregation who are mentally unstable. On more than one occasion we, like most urban churches, have been forced to use the assistance of the police to protect ourselves when someone has become violent. But it always makes me feel lousy to

have a person dragged out of church. Clearly, this is not what Jesus had in mind when he gave us the keys to the kingdom.

I have long taken comfort in the passage from Mark 9 that describes the disciples' failure in casting a demon out of a boy. I too know what it feels like to be told by Jesus to cast out evil and to fail. I do the best I can to help, to assist with medical referrals and financial needs, and to proclaim hope. But I'm no more successful than the first disciples in casting out anyone's demons.

I am almost accustomed to these failures, but Jean reminded me of something that I'd not thought of recently: that everyone who is tortured by evil voices has a mother and father somewhere, or brothers and sisters, or even a dog.

Perhaps there is not much the church can do when someone is so torn apart by his or her demons that there is little left for others to hold. But we can, as the church family, hold onto that family's sacred memories—and remember not to define the mentally ill by their psychoses.

Long before Jeffrey was driven to scream his way into a worship service wielding a knife, there was a teacher, a little league coach or a girlfriend who knew him in better days. There were parents who cradled him and dreamed the dreams that parents always have for newborns. We dare not forget that the crazed have names like Jeffrey and were not always known as the demoniacs.

We can remember that no one is ever lost in the hands of a Savior who alone casts out evil. We can be the memory that the present is never what defines a person. There is also a better past and a promise of a hope-filled future. This is why we pray.

We can remember to bear the family's grief and shame as our own. Jeffrey was baptized, which means we must embrace him as our brother. Just because we don't know how to care for a man with a weapon in church doesn't free us from the responsibility of claiming him.