

Who told you you were naked?
Ali Donohue
June 10, 2018

I was the managing editor of a theological book publishing house in NYC for a few years and here's a little known tidbit from the industry: authors are notoriously bad at giving their books good titles. They are equally bad at designing their book's cover, but this does not stop a healthy number of them from trying. As editors, we'd routinely find ourselves in the position of retitling a book, based on things like the book's content, market trends, and other titles out there — but we'd have to convince the author to go along. We weren't always successful, as evidenced by a book whose title was taken from this morning's reading from Genesis. And let me tell you, the book *Who Told You That You Were Naked?* never became a national bestseller.

The long corridor out of the office was lined with the company archives, which I read most of as I commuted those few years. But *Who Told You That You Were Naked?* stayed put on the shelves. I didn't want to attract the wrong kind of attention on the NYC subway.

As an experiment, I'll be posting my sermon on the St. John's website under this title as well, just to see if WordPress can show me how many people click on it. I'm not optimistic.

But if I do that, it occurs to me that it might be nice to address the question.

In the story from Genesis, it appears the writers are trying to create a scenario that explains our lost innocence. I suspect these writers had children, because Adam and Eve — in their doing EXACTLY what they were told not to do and then pointing the finger at someone else when they got caught — sounds an awful lot like behavior parents see about 900 times a day. Of course it also sounds like the behavior of many of our political leaders, as well. Our best selves — our fully mature selves — take full responsibility for our actions; our worst selves, our immature selves, do not.

But the importance of the question *Who Told You That You Were Naked?* does not actually lie in its answer. Rather, it lies in the fact that *God has to ask it*. Because that tells us something vital, something all of us need to hear on occasion, and that is that it

wasn't God who told us. God knows it wasn't God who told them they were naked and should be afraid. And if it wasn't God, then maybe it isn't something that should cause fear.

My nephew graduated from high school in VA this weekend and my mom and aunt are down there for the weekend. "How is everybody?" I asked. "How's Aidan? How's Kieran? How's Rosie?" Rosie is my adorable 14 year old niece.

"Oh it's so sad," my mom said. "Rose is beautiful." And friends, I saw it coming. "But she has Donohue legs." I didn't have to ask what she meant. It's a common refrain from my childhood.

"Donohue legs" are, for lack of a better word, a little large. Like speedskaters who retired so all the definition is gone but the bulk is still there. I didn't have to say anything for my mom — God love her — to continue:

"Your brother has them, you have them, your sister has them, and poor Rose has them."

I love family. You think you're asking an innocent question and suddenly an insult is hurtling your way, taking down your siblings

and niece in its path. No doubt the true target is the ex-husband who has been dead twenty years, but still.

There were years I was afraid to wear shorts because of my “Donohue legs.” And all those years God could have asked me, Who told you your legs were fat? I could have said, my mom did. Every model to walk a runway did. The cover of every magazine did. All of them say it. But God didn’t say it.

To God, Donohues don’t have fat or large legs. We just have legs. There are no “Donohue legs.” There are just legs. And we should all wear shorts without fear.

But God can ask this of all of us, I’m sure, or something similar, depending on the messages we’ve internalized.

Who told you that you were fat?

Who told you that you are too old?

Who told you that you’re a bad mother?

Who told you you should be working harder?

Who told you that sexual assault is your fault?

Who told you that you don’t deserve a wedding cake?

You see, each of us walk around with what writers call “an inner critic,” a voice that criticizes, nitpicks, diminishes, and finds fault with so much of what we look like, don’t look like, do and don’t do. And God wants us to know that that voice is not God.

Ignatius, my favorite saint and founder of the Jesuits, ascribes this voice to the “evil spirit,” a force in the world for destruction. And you don’t have to believe evil spirits actually exist to see evidence that they might. Subscribe to a national newspaper and you’ll see it daily.

Yet so often, good human beings fall for it. We internalize these messages, and can’t even imagine that perhaps they aren’t true. And we walk around believing we’re bad parents or fat or that it’s our fault something terrible happened to us. And by believing it, it has power over us. And it robs us of our joy.

In this morning’s Gospel passage, Jesus impresses upon us how critical it is that we discern these spirits properly.

In the Gospel scene, the people were saying of Jesus, “He’s gone out of his mind! He’s the devil!!”

And Jesus looks at them and asks, “I am driving OUT the devil. How can I BE the devil?”

But he doesn't leave it there. He could have just challenged their terrible logic, but instead he ups the ante, telling them, “There is one sin that cannot be forgiven. And that is the sin of insisting that the good spirit is actually evil.”

To fail to recognize the good spirit is to fail to recognize grace. And to not recognize grace is to not cooperate with it. It means we refuse to step into the flow of grace, into that great chain where we are forgiven and forgive others in return, where we love ourselves and love our neighbors just as much, where we are loved and redeemed in our areas of weakness and vulnerability, and this makes us want to reach out to others who are weak and vulnerable and be present to them. Where our wounds somehow become our strength and we are no longer afraid of the wounds of others, but believe that they too can be transformed into places of spectacular healing and grace. To fail to recognize grace means we stand on the sidelines, with abundant grace offered to us, but we see only evil.

I was ordained a deacon yesterday — perhaps you noticed the stole, or the many lei — or the halo — and let me tell you, this almost didn't happen. I was raised and educated and employed by a Catholic Church who loved me dearly and gave me wings to fly, but under no circumstances were they to fly me to any other denomination. That would be a betrayal. And certainly there are people who may even see this event not as a triumph of grace but as a triumph of evil. Were they to do that, they'd be committing the worst sin possible: mistaking the good spirit for the evil one.

So how do we know we are discerning properly?

Whenever something takes us further away from compassion and mercy, whenever it makes us less loving, less forgiving, less understanding, we can be pretty confident that it is not of God. “I came that you may have life, and have it to the full,” Jesus tells us elsewhere. So whenever we believe an inner voice that has us do something that diminishes our life, that makes it smaller, that puts a gate up around it and makes it less full, we can be sure that is not the spirit of God. Whenever it makes us feel fear or

shame, it is not the spirit of God. God does not peddle in fear.
Period.

So the next time your inner critic tells you something that makes you feel afraid, ask yourself, Who told you that? You'll see it wasn't God.

Love without fear is God's way. Look for it. Practice it. Push hard against whatever tells you otherwise.

And whatever you do, wear shorts. Amen.