If you had told me, when I was eight years old, or sixteen, or even twenty-four, that the day was coming when everyone would carry their telephone with them wherever they went, I would have told you that you were insane. And if you insisted that it would happen soon, and if you further told me that each telephone would also carry a small computer that could answer any question I might have, a small camera that could take limitless numbers of pictures, a small screen on which I could watch hundreds and thousands movies or television shows, and a small stereo that could play tens of thousands of songs like the world’s smallest jukebox, I would have concluded that there had been some kind of sneaky, sinister robot revolution and mankind had surrendered. And yet here we are. In the past ten years since June of 2007, when the first iPhone was brought to the market, Apple has sold over 1 billion iPhones. That is why literally almost everyone walks through the streets (or even drives across them) with their eyes on their screens and not on the world around them. It is not that these tools are bad; it’s just our nature to take something good and to enslave ourselves to it. Technology always changes but human nature never does. I, too, spend too much time in my life interacting with my portable telephone. I like to tell myself that the applications—or programs—on my iPhone help me organize my life. With a quick press of a button or tap on a screen I can organize my calendar appointments, monitor my (non-existent) exercise regimen and my checking account, track my email, texts, and phone messages, book a flight, buy a movie ticket, or shop for groceries. And yet I often feel like my immersion in my telephone, even when trying to organize my life, is actually a distraction from life—a way of resisting real life with a virtual one.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, which we read this morning, St. Paul writes, “Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist (I Cor. 8:5-6).” When Paul says “there are many gods and many lords,” he does not mean that there are other divine beings equal to and in competition with the One True God, the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Instead, he means that there are many things in heaven and on the earth that we treat as if they were gods. The world is filled with good things that we turn into idols that center and organize our lives. A god or idol is not a statue; a god is whatever is most important in our life, our highest priority, the thing on which everything else in our lives depends. The ancient Greeks and Romans believed that there were many gods in the heavens, and that a person’s decision about which god they would worship shaped his or her life decisions. There was one god for Beauty, named either Aphrodite or Venus. If a person followed Aphrodite or Venus, all their decisions were centered and bound on Beauty as the most important thing: Beauty was their organizing principle. Likewise, there was another god of war, named either Ares or Mars. If a person followed Ares or Mars, all of his or her decisions were centered and bound upon War, Conquest, and Glory as the most important things: War, Conquest, and Glory were their organizing principles. The fact that Roman culture had many gods to whom all citizens showed equal respect does not mean that the Roman valued the other cultures they had conquered; it shows that they believed in and worshiped the genius of the Emperor who kept everything and everyone together through the false peace of brutal force. In the same way that we use an iPhone to organize our time, knowledge, memories, resources, relationships, and even our entertainments, we turn whatever is most important to us other than God into a god that shapes and directs our lives

The problem with worshipping anything other than God is that our investment in that lesser god always creates resistance within us to the One True God. If we value wealth and financial security more than anything else, we resist God’s invitation to give and to share our wealth. If we value success, accomplishment, and public achievement more than anything else, we resist God’s invitation to serve others in quiet humility. You can complete the equation with whatever you personally are tempted to worship. The point is that our decision to put something at the center of our lives other than God does not hurt God—it only hurts us, because it limits our ability to engage in a relationship with Him. A mother or father can hug a small child while the child holds a beloved teddy bear, but it is hard for the child to return that hug when their arms are already full. Likewise, our ability to return to God the love He offers us is hampered when we cling to an idol.

This is also part of the point of today’s Gospel reading from Mark. It is Jesus’ first day on the job of His earthly ministry. He teaches a crowd in the synagogue in Capernaum, the place where he had just invited his first few fishermen disciples to join Him. The crowd marvels at Jesus because He teaches with *exousia*—divine power and authority. Unlike the nerdy scribes, who quote other scholars’ commentaries about the Old Testament and the Law, Jesus speaks from His experience and perspective as the Messiah, the Son of God. While the crowd marvels, a man within the synagogue begins to shout at Jesus, “What do You have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know You, You Who are the Holy One of God.” Clearly, the man is deeply threatened by what Jesus is saying and resists Him. Mark says that the man had a “*pneumatoi* *akatharto*”—a spirit that was unclean. That description is usually translated as his being possessed by a demon, which could certainly have been the case. But there is another translation that may be more subtle and perhaps more accurate. The word unclean “*akatharto*” means “no catharsis,” “unpurged,” “not pure.” It describes something that is mingled, mixed, or adulterated, the way that gold can be cheapened by adding lesser metals to it. We can think of the man with the unclean spirit as a man with mingled motives, adulterated values, and torn loyalties. He claims to worship the One True God, but something in Jesus’ teachings have made him aware that he actually worships something other than God. Maybe he came to the synagogue out of pride because the most important thing to him is to appear righteous; maybe he came out of nostalgia because the most important thing to him about worship is to recall childhood memories of the synagogue; maybe he came with an ideological or political agenda because the most important thing to him is to prove and affirm that he is right and others are wrong. Or maybe he comes because he loves religion perhaps even more than he loves God—even when God Himself stands in front of him. Regardless, Jesus’ authoritative teaching has revealed that his affections and loyalties are mixed, blended, compromised, and adulterated. Standing before Jesus, the man must choose which God he will serve. While he cries out in fearful resistance, Jesus simply says, “Be silent, and come out of him.” Immediately, his affection for any way other than Jesus to organize and define his life leaves him for good. On His first day on the job, Jesus has taught about God from His experience of being God, and he has freed His listeners from their captivity to any other gods that would resist Him.

In this church today, I would be so bold as to suggest that we ask ourselves whether and how we might be like that man with that unclean spirit. What gods bedazzle, define, and imprison us, such that we might resist the One True God: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God who became Man at the Bethlehem Manger; the God Who died on the Cross and rose from the dead; the God who has ascended into Heaven and has prepared a place for us with His Father and His saints? What iPhone screen or other flimsy god can stand a chance of resisting that kind of love? He purges us of our virtual gods and shatters our virtual lives because He is the real God Who is bringing us into real life. To those idols within us, He says, “Be silent, and come out.”