

Sermon "Score One for the Serpant"

Sunday, March 13, 2011

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Christ Church, Shaker Heights, OH

Lent I Year A: Genesis 2:15-17,3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

The rubrics – or instructions - concerning the service for the liturgy of Holy Baptism require that prior to the service, "Parents and godparents are to be instructed in the meaning of Baptism, in their duties to help the new Christians grow in the knowledge and love of God, and in their responsibilities as members of his Church."

In our practice here at Christ Church this means spending about an hour or so with the priest to receive this instruction the day before the baptism.

Many godparents and parents are more than a little perplexed and even a tad amused when we review the three renunciations of evil they are required to make as part of their commitment to the person being baptized. Their reactions remind me that as a whole society does not take evil seriously.

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?
Do you renounce the evil powers of this world, which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

Satan? Spiritual forces of wickedness? Sinful desires?

I just know that images of a little man in red tights, with a pitchfork and a pointy tail, Darth Vader and some hot fudge sundaes are running through people's minds when I speak of these three things. But those are trivial manifestations of something evil compared to what the Prayer Book is speaking of.

The Church takes evil and its power to harm humanity very seriously, I tell them. Don't allow evil to become a cartoonish Halloween caricature, a Hollywood character or a food temptation that gets you off your diet. In the larger scheme of things these are not evil.

Evil is an insidious, seductive voice in the world. Evil allows millions of people to die of hunger every year when there is more than plenty of food to feed the world. Evil is the voice that tells us that only American grain, transported on American ships, can be used to provide aid to hungry people is rationale. Evil tells us it is bad for our economy to actually provide aid to allow people to grow their own food and become self-reliant.

Evil tells us that providing tens of millions of dollars for farm subsidies that pay farmers not to grow food are okay even though children are dying. Evil tells us chronic hunger is not something we can do anything about, while we suffer an epidemic of obesity in America.

Evil is the irrational voice whispering in our ear that it is righteous and pleasing to God to ignore, harm, or even kill people different from ourselves. Evil is the cancer that prevents humans from loving God above all things and of loving our neighbor as our self. These illustrations usually bring everybody in the room back into focus.

Evil is something we are to take seriously, I say to the class.

Both our story from Genesis and the Gospel lesson from Matthew today are about evil appearing as a seductive tempter, one of evils favorite guises.

In Genesis we hear of God prohibiting Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The point the scripture is making in the prohibition to eat from this tree is that humanity was to obey God and not to aspire to know more than God, thereby disrupting the fundamental relationship between God and humankind. It is in the guise of a seductive, slinky serpent that evil tempts Eve into disobeying God; to overturn that sacred relationship.

“Don’t worry about it Eve,” the serpent says, “God just doesn’t want you to eat that lovely fruit because God wants to have all the fun – keep all the good stuff of life - for himself.” How many of us have heard that same seductive voice of evil from people or peer groups tempting us to join in on behavior that we knew was forbidden and wrong? “Come on do it,” they urge on. No real harm done and who will be the wiser? We can get away with it and no one, not even God, will know.” How many of the eighteen plus men in Cleveland, Texas who raped an eleven-year-old girl recently heard that tempting voice of evil in their ear?

The Genesis story is a cautionary tale telling us that acquiescing to evil’s voice of temptation creates a disruption in the fundamental relationship between God and us. When we cave to that voice we are no longer loving God and neighbor, we are only loving our selves. “My will be done,” we say, “not yours God.”

In Matthew, Jesus’ encounter with Satan is a confrontation with temptations that prowl around us every day. The human Jesus was tempted with food, with being God and earthly power. In all of these manifestations evil tempts us a well.

Cajoled and prodded by the temptations of Madison Avenue and the media we are encouraged at every turn to a life of self-indulgence. We are tempted to believe that the definition of daily bread, or the essentials of life, grows all the time. Once those “stones have been turned into bread” we abandon that relationship to the one from whom we

ask for the provision to provide us with our daily bread in the first place. We become slaves to the bread. Our appetite grows ravenous as it seeks those things beyond bread. It is at this point that we see ourselves as being like God, supplying our own needs at the expense of everyone else. Score one for the serpent.

Every relationship in our life tempts us to lord it over another person. It is not just the politicians and CEO's of the world who want to be God. Have you ever had a situation where you knew a co-worker made a serious mistake? Did you tell them they had made a huge blunder or did you keep it on the QT, thinking this was your chance to eliminate a competitor, hurting someone who you didn't like? Have we been tempted into acting like God in this situation, deluded into believing we are in control of our own fate and over another's. Score two for the serpent.

How about the temptation to control God, to have godly power over things? Religious leaders are apt to be seduced by this temptation. Politicians and cable television talk hosts who claim moral authority by calling on God's name for their causes do so as well. White supremacists, terrorists and religious extremists inflict hate and pain in God's name.

The question this temptation begs this week relates to the Supreme Court decision in *Synder versus Phelps*. Were eight of the nine justices on the Supreme Court tempted by evil when they decided in favor of the Westboro Baptist Church's hate-filled tactics? Were they tempted into being a god or at least protecting Westboro Baptist Church doing so? Or was the Court saying that even evil has a constitutionally protected right to a voice in America?

I have struggled of late with the realization that while something may be constitutionally legal, that doesn't mean it is either right or in alignment with the Gospel. I know that puts me on a slippery slope with other decisions by the Court as well. But as a Christian and an American I struggle with this question: Is evil at work when the expression of free speech becomes, as Justice Samuel Alito termed it, "a license for vicious verbal assault?"

As a Christian I can't help but feel, "Score three for the serpent."

C.S. Lewis once wrote that, "a silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try and resist temptation know how strong it is . . . A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered lie by giving in."

The good news is that we do not have to face Lewis' "hour later" alone. God is with us in the struggle when the seductive voice of temptation comes whispering. God

provides the strength and the perseverance to deny evil even a toe-hold in our souls. Through the Lenten disciplines that the Church calls us to; prayer, fasting, almsgiving and especially studying and reflecting on God's holy word in scripture, and then becoming living witnesses to that word allows God to be the bulwark against evil in the world.

This theology is best stated in Martin Luther's famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress."

“And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo, his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.”

What is left for us to do in the battle against evil is just to say that word.

Amen.