

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 11:14-36 "They Called Him Evil"

A cynical old proverb says that "No good deed goes unpunished!" I'm not sure of its origin, and you can take it in many ways, but it was certainly true of the life of Jesus. On his way to Jerusalem, probably now somewhere in Judea, he faces the worst accusation ever thrown at him: that he works for the devil, that he is an agent of Satan, or Beelzebub as this text calls him.

1) *The Adversary*

Jesus' ability to exorcise people afflicted by demonic powers is doubted by no-one. He was apparently not alone in that ability in the 1st C., and there are still plenty of reports of it even today. The argument that develops is over where Jesus gets the power to do that. He has himself claimed it as his Spirit-anointed ministry to "release the prisoners," but there are now those in the crowd - not just Scribes and Pharisees any more - who are so opposed to his claims to have brought "the kingdom of God" into their midst that they attack him as an agent of Satan - perhaps even Satan himself.

Who is this invisible evil power, anyway? In the Bible Satan is always depicted as God's adversary, although he is a created being dependent on God for his existence. In non-biblical writings, he is often described as a "fallen angel," and that seems a fair estimate of his status, and is consistent with the very little the Bible says about his origins. There is

a hint from the introduction to the book of Job that he had a role as a kind of prosecutor, an accuser of wrong-doers, perhaps a prodder of consciences.

I like to think of him as a sort of Attorney General gone bad! He works for the Justice Department; he majors in guilt. But his desire to prove people guilty is constantly frustrated by "The Judge of all the Earth," who is too compassionate, too merciful, too ready to forgive the offences of repentant sinners. In a word, Satan hates God's grace. So he tries to lead people to distrust God, accuses God of being unjust, and deceives people into believing that their guilt is so bad, they may as well join forces with him against "the soft Judge" who mismanages the world.

The Bible calls him "the deceiver," the "slanderer," "the evil one," "the enemy." He is supported by legions of "unclean spirits" - demons - who can afflict people in body and spirit, and he is called "The Prince of Demons." Equal in power to God he is not; equal in power to the Holy Spirit he is not, equal in power to Jesus the Son he is not. There is no "dualism" of equal and opposing forces in the Bible, no doubt as to who is in charge, or what the final fate of Satan will be. Here in the Gospels he has the label "Beelzebub," which literally means "lord of the flies," probably a derisive alteration to the name Baal-Zebul - Lord of the High

Place - a god the 9th C. BC Canaanites worshipped.

So Jesus, whose power for good, whose healings and deliverances, whose welcoming "the poor" into the kingdom of God, have become famous in Israel, is accused of being an agent of Satan. The power of the Holy Spirit is defamed as demonic. God in the flesh is called the devil. The incarnate Son who has come to redeem his people will be killed. No good deed goes unpunished in a fallen world.

2) *Signs*

In truth, of course, Jesus is stronger than the powers of darkness, although for a time he will act as though he is not. But that moment has not quite arrived. At this point, Jesus simply points out the illogic of supposing that Satan's power casts out demons, demands of his critics whose power they use in exorcism, and declares that he is the "strong man" who is overcoming Satan and freeing his prisoners. What is more, the power Jesus is showing is a sign that the kingdom of God is now among them.

But the crowd is not persuaded, and some among them want another "sign" from heaven to validate Jesus. If healings and exorcisms and miracles are not enough, what do they want? They are in fact being perverse; they already have all the evidence they need to make a commitment, or not, to follow Jesus. It's up to them to decide! They will get no "signs from heaven" to persuade them. Jesus is standing before them, casting out demons, healing the sick, feeding the 5000, raising the dead, and preaching a gospel of grace and acceptance and inclusion to all who will embrace it. What more do they want?

Jonah, the reluctant missionary to Nineveh, became a sign to that city by preaching

repentance and forgiveness, and doubtless also by his 3-day rescue in the belly of a fish. The Queen of Sheba traveled a thousand miles to learn that the LORD was truly with Solomon and had given him wisdom and wealth. Now someone greater than Jonah or Solomon was here, and 1st C. Judea could not see it; could not, would not, recognize the Messiah of Israel who preached repentance and the coming of God's kingdom.

What was wrong with their eyes? They acted as though they were blind; worse, they were acting as though their eyes were "bad" - diseased, distorted, darkened. Instead of seeing the light of Jesus in action, they claimed to be seeing the dark work of "the evil one." What was wrong with them? Did they not realize that they were the ones in darkness? How do you reach people who call the work of God evil? How can those who call the Spirit of God demonic ever repent? How can those who call Jesus the devil find the forgiveness he has come to bring?

But that's all the work of the deceiver, the slanderer, the liar. When he calls white black, some people believe him. When he calls God unjust, some people cheer. When he disguises himself as "an angel of light," some people gladly follow him. "Beware the adversary," says Jesus.

3) *Who To Believe?*

"So who you going to believe?" God or the devil? Is the life and ministry and death and resurrection and exaltation of Jesus the best thing that ever happened in this world, or the worst? Are you going to be a Christian believer, or follow one of the best-selling "new atheists" who claim that "religion" (by which they chiefly mean Christianity) is responsible for most of the evils in the world? Has Christian faith done more harm than good? Is it responsible for war, for

imperialism, for racism and “spec-ism” and subjugation of women and rape of the environment? There are many people today who think so!

Or at a more personal level: do we think we are more moral than God, wiser than God, would do a better job of running things – especially our own lives – than God can or does? Do we think he is unfair, unfeeling, even vindictive? Do we hate him for allowing the death of someone we loved at an early age? Do we think he lets some people get away with murder, while we suffer for minor things? Do we think he is unjust?

Do we call black white these days? Are things that were once clearly unacceptable, and sinful, now unexceptionable, acceptable, a constitutional right? Has the deceiver got us into a place where we dare not speak a word of dissent? Has the rogue Attorney General persuaded us that anything goes – especially if it will “keep us safe”?

“Who are you going to believe these days?” It’s not easy, is it? We are persuaded by loud and moneyed voices to believe things that could not possibly be true, but make good slogans. We are bombarded hour by hour by propaganda and sales pitches, and are made to feel fools if we don’t agree. “Who are you going to believe?” Is it possible any more to have a Christian mind, to think spiritually, to discern moral differences, to be grounded in Christian ethics? Or are we so tossed around by the 24-hour news cycle and the “opinionators” that we cannot see, cannot hear, cannot think any more?

Are we calling darkness, light and light, darkness? Are we calling ourselves more moral than God? Are we ready to label Jesus demonic? Who would have thought that possible? It seems passing strange to us that 1st C. Jews could have said Jesus operated in

the power of Satan, but we live in a world where many influential people regard Christianity as a curse on our society, a source of bigotry and violence, an obstacle to public harmony and to medical progress. And privately, we curse God out for allowing bad things to come into our lives all undeserved!

So like Jesus’ listeners, we need to be sure we are seeing things clearly, and that the darkness that is in us does not distort our view of what is around us. We have to beware “The Lie” that pervades the world – that God is mean, and we are smart, and that you can have it all, your way, at no cost except a deadly weight of guilt... This is all the work of “the deceiver,” the adversary, the accuser, who wants us to distrust God.

“Blessed,” says Jesus, “are those who hear and obey the word of God.” That is how eyes are opened; that is how the darkness within is overcome; that is how the Spirit of God comes in and becomes at home in us and displaces the evil that was once there – that is who prevents expelled demons returning to an empty house. That is when we experience the truth of Paul’s claim that “*greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world*” – the Spirit of God is greater than Satan.

Lord have mercy on our blindness, and the darkness within, and the ease with which we believe the deceiver and his accusations, and succumb to his chaining us with guilt. Praise to Jesus the Christ, who came to release the prisoners, to bring forgiveness to the repentant and sight to the blind!

Let us pray...