

Note to reader: This is my sermon and I use resources, the biblical and pastoral rock stars that have taught me to think and interpret the scriptures the way that I do. Please know that I don't have a publishing house behind me editing any typographical errors or embarrassing grammatical mistakes. So please have grace for my mistakes as I do for yours.

Oak Forest UMC

"Looking Evil in the Eye"

Luke 10:1-16; 17-23

June 14th, 2020

Thesis: Jesus tells us to cast out demonic forces around us, but it starts with us; looking inside ourselves and receiving the cleansing power of Jesus to cast out our own demons.

Talking about evil isn't polite talk, particularly in a United Methodist Church...

Casting out demons?

Pentecostal churches, Benny Hin, snake handlers in the mountains outside Asheville are the sorts of images that come to mind when I think about casting out demons. But casting out demons is all over the Bible- over 40 times in the New Testament alone.

But what does Jesus really mean and who are what is "demonic?"

Today when we read that in scripture, those unfortunate souls who are affected by demons, many have interpreted that as mental illness. The stories of Jesus casting out the demons from the crazed man who lived in the caverns beyond the village... they were so afraid of him that they chained him into that cave like a raging lion. Jesus comes along and speaks directly to the demonic forces that have consumed the man's soul and he casts them out into a herd of pigs, which personally hurts my feelings, but the pigs can't even take the forces of evil that the entire herd drowned themselves.

Mary Magdalene who most think was a prostitute that Jesus rescued, and that is a completely incorrect reading of her. Mary Magdalene was never a

prostitute,¹ but instead she was healed from 7 demons by Jesus and became his faithful disciple all the way to the cross and resurrection and then she and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James and John became the first people to preach the Gospel to the world.²

Jesus himself was accused of being a demon, in fact the Prince of all demons, many times by some of the preachers and biblical experts of his day.³ Think about that for a moment, for all the healing, all the teaching, all the feeding of thousands of people who were hungry, for all that Jesus had already done, they throw the insult of being evil in his face.

We know that Jesus wasn't evil of course, but clearly we have struggled to really define what evil really is and what it is not. How can we do what Jesus tells us to do, like cast out demons and evil forces, if we struggle to define what evil is in the first place?

The good news is that I am not the only one who has struggled with this question. In fact, all the ministers who become ordained have to answer that same question and defend their answer in front of the board of ordained ministry. It's such an important question, that we can't become ordained until we really wrestle with this question too. The good news is that we have friends who have been on that same search and have come up with some really helpful words for our day. And I have discovered that not only are biblical scholars writing and thinking about this, but so are artists, musicians, poets, novelists, movie producers. This is one of those age old questions... what is evil and how do we deal with it. One of the most helpful places, to my delights and surprise, came

¹ See Luke 8:2

² See Luke 24:10

³ See Matthew 9:32-34; 12:22-29; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 11:14-20;

from the son of Bob Dylan. Jakob Dylan. He defines evil through a song he wrote called "Evil is alive, evil is well."

[Verse 1]

Well, it doesn't always have a shape
 Almost never does it have a name
 It maybe has a pitchfork, maybe has a tail
 But evil is alive and well
 It might walk upright from out of the inferno
 Maybe come on horseback through deep snow
 It's ragged and fat, it's hungry as hell
 And evil is alive and well

[Chorus]

Now, evil is alive, evil is well
 Evil is alive, evil is well
 Now, on your feet to the tower and yell
 "Evil is alive and well"

[Verse 2]

May be too humble to want to speak
 May have a blood soaked bird in its teeth
 Smoked-filled skies and bees in the well
 And evil is alive and well
 Now maybe in a palace, maybe in the streets
 Maybe here among us on a crowded beach
 It may be asleep in a roadside motel
 But evil is alive and well

[Chorus]

Now, evil is alive, evil is well
 Evil is alive, evil is well
 Now, on your feet to the tower and yell
 That evil is alive

[Bridge]

It's well
 Down in every ditch, up on every hill
 It's well

I've got my radio on, drowning the bells

[Verse 3]

When midnight's done and the day won't start
 All I ever gave you was a broken heart
 Well, it's hard to admit, but it's easy to tell
 That evil is alive and well

[Chorus]

Now, evil is alive, evil is well
 Evil is alive, evil is well
 Now, on your feet, to the tower and yell
 That evil is alive, and well
 Evil is alive, it's well
 Evil is alive, it's well
 Evil is alive and well

Please don't misinterpret what he's doing. Jakob Dylan isn't singing praises to evil, instead he is looking evil right in the eye and naming the reality the forces are out there, that they are real, and they come in all sorts of forms. Another friend who has wrestled with this is the biblical scholar N.T. Wright who recognizes that in our struggle to figure this out have come up with three approaches that perpetuate the evil rather than eliminate it like Jesus calls us to do.

NT Wright- "Evil is real and powerful. It is not only 'out there', in other people, but it is present and active within each of us. When human beings worship that which is not God, they give authority to forces of destruction and malevolence; and those forces gain a power, collectively, that has, down the centuries of Christian experience, caused wise people to personify it, to give it the name of Satan, the Accuser. 'The Satan,' 'the Evil One,' is not equal and opposite to God; but 'he,' or "it," is a potent force, opposed to God's good creation, and

particularly to the human beings whom God wishes to put in authority over his world.”⁴

Story- Watch George Floyd’s arrest video- 8 minutes 26 seconds under the knee of a Derek Chauvin, after he was already placed in and out of a police vehicle. He cries out, “I can’t breathe” and calls for his momma. But what is most disturbing is how the cries for his life came from those watching and the things they say to the police. And it’s as if the people are speaking a foreign language to the officers. The police are not evil, protesters are not evil, are Black brothers are and sisters are not evil, we are not evil. But the forces of evil are alive and they are well. So how are we to deal with this force of evil that seems way too overwhelming to conquer?

“The first answer is the head-in-the-sand approach. You can pretend that evil doesn’t really exist, or that, if it does, it doesn’t really matter. Yes, we say, people do silly things sometimes, but if we all try a little harder it’ll work out all right. That’s about as much use as saying, when the house is on fire, that yes, it is getting a little warm, but if we all take off a layer of clothing and drink more iced water things will be just fine.

The second answer, the mirror-image of the first, is to wallow in evil, and to see it all over the place. Once you realize that there is such a thing as radical evil, and that it’s much more powerful than you are, you can either become evil yourself or become paranoid, seeing demons behind every bush. Either way, you are giving in — indeed, caving in, allowing evil to dominate you.

The third answer is that of self-righteousness. “Lord, I thank thee that I am not as other people.” Yes, we say, evil is out there all right; but we are the

⁴ N.T. Wright. “What, Then, is Evil And How Are We Delivered?” Except from *The Lord and His Prayer* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2014).

righteous ones, the holy ones, called to leap on our white chargers and ride off to do battle with it. But what if self-righteous battles are themselves another manifestation of evil?”

The Good News is that Jesus has already conquered evil through his work on the cross. As N.T. Wright says, “The only reason to shrink from a serious and radical analysis of evil would be if we were to forget that in the cross God has seriously and radically dealt with it. We are instinctively afraid of facing the evil that still lurks within us; we are, perhaps, also afraid of the humiliation involved in grasping God’s solution to it. Our fear is natural.”⁵

The first step to casting out the forces of evil in this world is start by looking inside ourselves first. It’s not pointing a finger at all those “other people”, it’s not trying to ignore it, or throw your hands in the air and say “If you can’t beat them, just join them.” The first step is to recognize that we evil can and grow in us. Nadia Bolz-Weber says that we are simultaneously sinners and saints. I call this the “soul work” that is required of every Christian. Just because you have accepted Jesus in your heart, doesn’t immune any of us for being influenced by the evil forces of our day. That is why we have to take inventory of our own souls, our worldviews, our actions, our thoughts. As difficult and painful as this can be, we are not alone in this work. Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit to be with us, to allow our bodies to be the Temple of God’s Spirit, so as we take inventory of what’s inside, ask God to take you to those places that you need to examine. This may seem like a real personal endeavor but I know that biggest transformation has happened for me through experiences, by listening to others pain, having

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Ibid.*

conversations with people I don't understand or even agree with and to know that God is right there in the middle of it all.

Jesus didn't eliminate evil from the world, but Jesus empowers us to bring it to its knees. Evil is alive and Evil is well but through Jesus we are strengthened, equipped, and given courage look at it eye to eye , to face the evil forces within ourselves, and to announce to ourselves first that we will refuse to follow the forces that seek to destroy, divide, humiliate, and harm our human community that is made up of all God's created human beings. For there is no greater work than to be about the same work of Jesus Christ our Savior who redeems us first so we can go out and to announce the time has come to bring news to the poor, proclaim release to those who are imprisoned, to recover the sight to those who are blind, to set the burdened and battered free, and to announce that This is God's year to act!"

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.