

“God vs. Evil”

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New Testament Lesson: Mark 3:20-27

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 27:1-4

On Tuesday, our church Vitality and Growth Committee spoke to an expert who helps churches ensure that, in each of their ministry programs, they are firing on all cylinders. At one point, he spoke about the humility of Jesus, as well as his assertiveness.

We all know that Jesus was humble, all the way to the cross. It was never about him; always about God. That’s why his humility never led to passivity. Jesus was not passive; he was passionate! – passionate about his mission and ministry, and laser focused on achieving it, achieving what God was – and is – doing through him, at any given moment. We should be so focused in our lives.

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus gives us a model – an example – of laser-like focus – assertiveness- coupled with humility and compassion. Jesus is attacked by two very different groups of people – his family, who are supposed to support him in his life’s mission, and the religious authorities, who are *supposed* to help him to achieve it, if they are really focused on serving God’s. Turns out, they’re not. When things get a little uncomfortable, both the family of Jesus and the religious leaders lose focus. They no longer see *what’s really important*.

The religious leaders are concerned more about their authority than they are about their God-given mission. As Mark tells it, “The scribes who came down from Jerusalem said (of Jesus), ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’”

In other words, because Jesus is not one of them, he must be one of Satan’s, doing the will of pure evil personified. But as we will see, they’ve got it all backwards.

While the religious leaders are focused solely on themselves, Jesus is focused on *the needs of others*, even at the expense of his need for food. “The crowd,” says Mark, “came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’ His family sees what’s happening and they’ve got to agree, he’s acting crazy. So they try to restrain him.

But Jesus will not be restrained! Nothing can stand in opposition to God’s plan and purpose, no matter how crazy it may seem compared to this world of ours. Think about. The world walks all over the weak and the poor. While God’s people – the true church – raises them up, even at the expense of our own comfort and wealth.

The world says, "You are entitled to hate those who hurt you." The Lord says, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." The world is full of people trying to sock away all the money they can. We are called to give it away, in service to God. The world's motto is, "Love yourself and try not to hurt your neighbor." Our motto is, "Love your neighbor, so much so, that you actually give of yourself in service to others."

Those are just a few of the crazy things Jesus teaches. The world relies on logic and reason, while followers of Jesus are led by faith. Looking at the family of Jesus and the religious leaders of his time, it's hard to image their negative response to his faithful actions. But then we look at ourselves. And we see that, we too, have a tendency to place logic ahead of our faith.

Let's face it, we've all compromised our faith to protect our own self-interest – whether that's being afraid to give of our limited time and money, passing by a neighbor in need, or holding a grudge against an enemy, cursing those who are out to get us. How can we turn this around?

How do we stand firm in the faith even at the risk of our own self-interest? How do we take that leap of faith in order to stand alongside Jesus? We do that the same way Jesus did it: with humility and assertiveness.

The religious leaders of his day – the highest authority in all the world for a Jew like Jesus – accused him of doing evil. But instead of getting defensive, instead of getting all high and mighty, look what Jesus does. Jesus humbly and faithfully meets them in their need. As Mark remembers it, Jesus "called them to him, and spoke to them in parables." Why speak to them in parables? Why not tell it like it is? – "I'm Jesus, your not, get over it!" Jesus speaks to them in parables for two very important reasons.

First, a parable is designed to teach. Jesus is hoping to lead them – and us – to God, to a more *authentic, genuine faith*. Second, a parable is a doorway to the truth. But, it's only open to those who recognize it. Some people can be staring God's honest truth right in the face, and not see it. So they turn their back on the truth, on God.

This is what Jesus is responding to and teaching about in these parables. Remember the parables in today's reading, the one where Jesus talked about a kingdom divided against itself; and the other one where he talked about a household – a family – divided against itself? It cannot stand!

In other words, nothing can stand apart from God. If this church were not doing the work of the Lord, it would cease to exist. When a household or a family moves away from the Lord, it ceases to exist, at least as families ought to exist, with mutual love and support.

We've all seen it – families without that common bound of love and kindness and self-giving – they stop acting like family toward one another. Sadly, it happens all too often. If we don't stand together, we fall apart.

But don't despair. There is a third parable in our reading today. The parable of the strong man. Jesus says, "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man. Then indeed the house can be plundered."

Here, Jesus is talking about Satan and himself. Satan is the strong man – the source of all evil – but Jesus is the stronger man in this parable! Jesus cannot be restrained – not by any power on earth. Jesus uses this parable to take hold of the religious authorities and tie them all up in knots.

Jesus stands accused of casting out demons by using the power of Satan, of overcoming evil by using the power of evil. It doesn't make any sense! No one can use evil to do something good. If evil were used to do something good – like overcome evil – then it wouldn't be evil, would it?!? It would be good. Do you see how Jesus takes the power of evil and turns it on its head? Evil can not stand in *the presence of the Lord*. On that, we can be sure; on that we can make our stand with humility and assertiveness.

As powerful as evil is in this world, God is more powerful. God is the one who enters the house – enters the house of evil – ties it up, restrains it, renders it powerless, and takes back that which evil held captive, that which the strong man plundered.

When Jesus went around casting out demons, he was showing the world just who is in charge here. In the battle of God vs. Evil, God wins, every time. So we don't have to worry about the forces of evil in this world. When we see something that's clearly headed in the wrong direction – in our families, among our friends, in this church or in our communities – we can look to God, confident in God's power to either turn it around or to let it fall under the weight of its own deception.

That is the faithful action of the stronger man, the stronger woman, the stronger person. The stronger person, when faced by evil and wrong-doing, doesn't become defensive. He or she becomes like Jesus, Jesus who humbly but assertively aligned himself with God's will, relying solely on God's power and authority.

The way we do that, as followers of Jesus, is by staying focused on what's really important, things like: looking after the needs of others, cultivating a genuine and authentic faith, and asking Jesus to come alongside us in all that we do. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Life. That is what you offer us.

In a world filled with death, you offer life.

In a world overcome by sickness and disease, you offer life.

In a world consumed with taking life, you offer life.

In a world that is tired and weary, you offer life.

Life.

Do we even understand what this really means for us? Are we willing to receive the life you offer?

Transform our hearts, O God, to desire the good and eternal life you so freely want to give us.

Turn our minds from death and loss toward your promise of renewal and abundance, even life abundant!

We pray all this in the name of the way, the truth and the life, Jesus the Christ, who taught us the prayer we know raise up to you in song:

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;

Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,

For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.