**“The Devil’s Greatest Trick”**

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The devil has never played a very large role in my own personal spirituality. The notion of a cosmic struggle between an embodied force for evil on the one hand, and an embodied force for good on the other, have never really made a lot of sense to me. But they apparently make great books and movies. Lord of the Rings springs to mind. And there’s another one that’s just come out that I haven’t seen, “Beautiful Creatures.” Apparently the idea is that this adolescent child will, at age 13 or so “will have her soul claimed for good or for evil” by one or the other mythic personifications of Right and Wrong.

But I find the idea that there is this cosmic war going on between Satan and God, and we have to choose whose side we are on to be not fully reflective of true human nature. I don’t believe that people are inherently good or bad – playing for one team or another. Rather, I believe that all people contain the capacity for good and for evil within them. Our hearts and souls, our choices and actions are the venue in which good and evil reside --- and we experience the rewards and consequences of our choices here in this life, as individuals and as communities.

I had a friend awhile back who liked to say, “The Devil’s greatest trick is to make you believe that he doesn’t exist.” I used to respond to this by saying in my head, “well, it’s working, because I have my doubts.” But I think I understand what he meant. And I agree with it. We often fail to consider that there are moral dimensions to the choices we make. We live in a time and a place that doesn’t encourage nuanced moral reflection, and that doesn’t really have the social structures in place to support that kind of decision making in every day life. We know more about basic the principles of economic markets, scientific inquiry, even basic math, than we do about the foundations of ethics and morality. In this information age, we’ve become so obsessed with acquiring new knowledge about how to do things, that questions about whether to do certain things have become obscured or even ignored.

That’s what I mean today when I repeat my friend’s line about the devil making us believe he doesn’t exist. We are less and less likely to consider that our actions and decisions have important moral consequences – not just for our own lives, but for the lives of others who are touched by our decisions. And in this global economy, that can be true regardless of whether or not we’ve ever met them…even though these relationships are often invisible to us, hidden by large banners promising 50% off or buy one, get two free.

I don’t know if you happened to look at the cover art on today’s bulletin, but it kind of goes to this point. When I first saw this image, it took me about a minute to even realize that this was Satan cozying up to Jesus. His tail is his only giveaway – and Jesus can’t see it, because Satan’s gotten right up close to him. I find this image striking, a little disturbing, and entirely reflective of how often we forget that there are always moral and ethical dimensions to the relationships, decisions, and actions of our lives. The devil may not exist, but the potential for ethical harm does – especially when we’re so close to the situation that we can’t see it lurking in plain sight.

II.

When we do remember to consider the ethics of our choice making, it’s usually after the fact. And even more problematically, we don’t necessarily have the tools at hand that we need to engage them deeply – or the personal conviction to act on our conclusions. What might these tools be…and how might we gain the personal conviction to act on our moral conclusions?

In today’s Gospel, about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, Jesus offers some possible answers to both of these questions for us. Satan offers Jesus three opportunities to advance his own interests. Jesus rejects all three – but the moral dimensions of each temptation are different. And Jesus is able to recognize them all. The easiest temptation to evaluate ethically seems to me to be the second one: Satan’s invitation to worldly power and control. Most of us instinctively know that the desire to attain power over other people and groups fails to honor the dignity and worth of those whom we seek to control. And more than that, Jesus knows that the cost of obtaining this ‘prize’ is just too high. It would require him to break the first and most important commandment for faithful people: to love God and worship God alone. The ends are bad. The means to those ends are bad. Easy call. Jesus knows to reject this temptation because he knows the moral precepts at the core of his faith, and is willing to apply them.

The third temptation, in which Satan demands that Jesus prove God’s favor towards him by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple is a bit harder to decode. I think the temptation here is to obtain proof of God’s love. If God really loves you, he’ll save you, and then you’ll know for sure. Jesus however, needs no proof of God’s love. He already knows it to be true, so this temptation really offers nothing of value to him. Satan is trying to get Jesus to desire something he doesn’t want or need. Perhaps Satan is interviewing for a marketing position – because this temptation is not unlike the temptation of most modern advertising efforts: trying to get us to want or need something we don’t actually want or need. Jesus has the moral clarity to see though it.

That leaves us with the first temptation. Jesus’ refusal to turn stones into bread. We read this passage every year, and every year I am confused about why it would be so bad for Jesus to turn stones into bread. Who would it hurt? This temptation is the hardest in which to see the moral dimension at play. I think it has to do with enticing Jesus to abandon his commitment to a spiritual practice because it became very hard – painful even.

I don’t personally find complete fasting from food to be a spiritual practice that helps me feel closer to God or make more ethical choices. But Jesus did. His fasting in the wilderness was entirely voluntary. It was his response to the Holy Spirit’s leading. He felt that this endeavor would bring him closer to God. Satan’s tempts Jesus to abandon the spiritual practice that Jesus has chosen to engage in, because of the costs of pursuing that practice.

All of us, myself at the top of the list, face a version of this kind of temptation with some frequency. We face it when we have to decide how often we will let conflicting schedules draw us away from Eucharist together. We face it when we have to decide whether to offer a little more of our time to the parish when asked to take on a new ministry. I personally face it on the Tue/Wed/Thu mornings when no one shows up to do morning prayer. Do I just skip it for the day and spend another 20 minutes doing email, or do I stay with my practice, even when there is no one there to watch?

I think one of the purposes of today’s Gospel passage is to remind us that it is only because Jesus persists in his own chosen spiritual practice that he has the strength to act on his ethical convictions in the moral dilemmas that follow. His choosing to commit to that intimacy of love and prayer with God through his own practices enables that relationship to be a source of moral strength for him when the decisions are far more serious. And I know that’s true for me as well.

III.

So, we have three tools from Jesus to aid us in our own moral evaluations. First, know the basic moral foundations of our faith and value nothing above God’s love. Second, be aware of attempts to make you desire things that you do not need. And third, commit to the spiritual practices and commitments you have chosen: participation in church life, cultivating an intimate life of prayer with God, engaging the various ministries you have been called to. These practices will sustain us in knowing that there is something of greater value than our own immediate satisfaction, success, or advancement…which we easily forget in our modern wilderness.

One last thing. There’s a major component of our own moral decision making that is missing from today’s story of Jesus in the wilderness: other people. Ethics doesn’t occur in a vacuum. And as alone as we can sometimes feel trying to figure out the right thing – we are, in fact, never alone.

Part of the value of Christian community is to be among others who can help constructively in the discernment of how to act in a difficult situation. This is not to be confused with judgmentalism or moral superiority, which are unhelpful for anything except increasing feelings of guilt. Rather, I’m talking about the role of others in consulting, reflecting back, and simply holding in thought and prayer, someone who is taking on the important but difficult task of considering the ethical dimensions of a decision. This kind of moral solidarity validates the importance of faithful ethical reflection in a world that ignores the spiritual or deems it silly. We can use each other to be our bread, our sustenance, when we find ourselves in the wilderness, wondering what direction to go. Together, we can know far more about the mind of God that we can alone – and together we can get the distance we need to see the moral dimensions lurking in our choices that so many others ignore. Amen.