

Giving The Devil His Due

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January 30, 1994

If you have read the most recent newsletter, and if you have a good memory for trivia, perhaps you will recognize that this is not the sermon I promised you for this week. I must say that I really tried to stick with the topic I had announced. Someone had asked me to discuss "Grace," and what that theological term means in our daily lives. Sometime soon, I will return to that topic and attempt to do justice by it, but this week I found myself unable to drive from my mind an unexpected encounter, and since grace involves being able to respond to the unexpected gifts which come our way, I have chosen to wrestle with another topic for this morning.

A little over a week or so ago, I found myself at an interfaith clergy luncheon. The usual pattern of such gatherings involves a great deal of talk about a great many subjects, always avoiding any discussion of religion. In the midst of the meal, I was suddenly aware that at the table behind me the rules were being broken. A rabbi and the minister of an African American congregation were deeply involved in a discussion of whether the Devil existed.

The African American clergyman argued that the existence of the Devil is attested to throughout the Old Testament. The Rabbi insisted that except for the book of Job, which refers to "the Satan," a functionary in the divine court, there is no reference to the Devil in the Torah. Gradually other people at the table were drawn into the discussion. A Methodist minister could not accept the idea of evil personified in a supernatural being, but felt impelled to argue that evil is real, nonetheless. An Episcopalian priest argued that evil is personified; he had encountered in several individuals he knew. At that point, someone turned to me and asked, "What about it? Do you believe in the Devil?" And then someone said, "He doesn't believe in God! How could he believe in the Devil?" At this point, the chair of the group interrupted the discussion to introduce the program for the day, and we reverted to form, by putting the religious discussion behind us.

I have found myself thinking about this conversation in the days which have passed, wishing there had been time and opportunity for a fuller discussion of the topic. The more I thought about that luncheon conversation, the more convinced I became that behind the light banter and the joking tone was a legitimate concern deserving a more thoughtful response. I remember thinking of Mark Twain's comment that poor Satan was the classic victim of a bad press, that he was always being bad-mouthed, and that undoubtedly an impartial inquiry into his history and character would reveal some endearing characteristics. Given the fact that most of the pulpits in the land are aggressively pro-God, maybe it is only fair that we should devote some time to re-examining the Devil and attempting to rehabilitate his character.

In all seriousness, there has seldom been a time in human history when the problem of the nature and persistence of evil has been more pressing and more relevant. We are the generation still struggling to comprehend the scope and meaning of the great holocaust which consigned six million Jews and God know how many other people to the gas chambers and cremation ovens of Nazi death camps. (Despite the occasional attempts by some to insist that the holocaust never happened, we know that it presents us an unresolved moral challenge which we dare not forget until we have understood what happened and why.)

We are the generation still struggling to comprehend the incineration of entire cities, and the nuclear bombing of civilian populations. We are the generation which watched our own liberal democracy--with the best of intentions--slowly drawn into a vicious war of attrition in Southeast Asia; the generation which has lived most of our lives with an international arrangement dependent for its stability upon a stockpile of weapons which, if used, could destroy human civilization utterly and perhaps wipe out all life on the planet. We are the generation which, having endured the cold war, now finds ourselves in world in which ancient ethnic hatreds boil over into patterns of ethnic cleansing, destroying young and old alike. We are the generation which which has had to cope with the rise of random, indiscriminate international terrorism as a tool of political and ideological struggle. We are the generation which now lives in terror as pointless violence ravages our great cities, as poverty in the midst of plenty destroys human lives. We are the generation which which has grown cynical as we have confronted the spector of corruption in business and government at all levels. Maybe it is time that we paused for a moment to talk seriously about the Devil.

Without a doubt, our problem with the existence of evil is compounded by the fact that the mind-set of the modern era served to relativize and, to some degree, trivialize the nature and reality of evil. In terms of the modern world-view, the perspective which dominated the western world from the enlightenment until recent times, good and evil were categories which had no existence apart from human perspective. The universe, the world of natural process, was essentially neutral--neither good nor evil. It was the human animal who injected values into an essentially valueless context. Therefore, good and evil were human creations and human problems, generated by human thoughts and actions and human responses, with no external referent. It is small wonder that God and the Devil alike were banished from the realm of serious consideration, for both are symbols of the conviction that good and evil, right and wrong are more than simple human conventions, but are rooted in the very nature of the universe itself--that the apparent struggle between good and evil is more than just an intra-mural sport, that to some degree, all of existence is at risk in the outcome of that struggle.

The modern world was not content to confine evil to the human realm. In one of the most heroic poses in all human history, the modern era saw evil as an accidental and transient quality of human experience. It had its roots in ignorance and superstition and frustration. As human beings increased their knowledge--both of themselves and of the world in which they lived; as human beings mastered the arts and sciences which could free them

from crippling helplessness and frustration, the sway of evil would be reduced steadily, and humanity's natural goodness would rule human undertakings. There was no original sin; there was no fall from grace; indeed, even the concept of sin was rejected as unhelpful. Evil was simply the result of ignorance and salvation was by education and knowledge alone. If we could learn to manipulate the environment properly we could banish evil "forever" for, evil existed only as a troublesome testimony to inadequate and insufficient social arrangements. There is no need for a devil to explain the existence of phenomena which could be accounted for on the basis of inadequate parenting, poor schooling, lack of nutrition, and an inequitable distribution of wealth and power.

Through this century, this modern vision of the nature and source of evil has not fared well. One by one we have watched the dogmas of the modern era fall before the onslaught of bitter, painful human experience. I will not take the time to catalog those experiences which have called into question the simplistic optimism of the modern age. I would simply remind you that it was not some primitive, ignorant savage with a bone in his nose who has brought human civilization to the brink of extinction. It was not the superstitious ritual of some illiterate witch doctor which, for decades, held the human community, the planet around, hostage to the threat of nuclear annihilation. It was not some tribe of uneducated primitives which encompassed the slaughter of millions of innocent men and women and children in state-run murder machines. Quite the contrary. The horrors we have witnessed and still witness in this century have been visited upon the human community precisely by those who have benefited most fully from the modern confidence in the saving efficacy of knowledge, power and education