

Sermon *The Cross Sets Us Free*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 2.15.26

Exodus 24:12-18
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9
Psalm 2

Our discussion groups tackled an article that suggested the 20th and 21st century American Christian Church has put too much emphasis on the devil and not nearly enough attention to our own desires. The author, Jen Wilken, in her article, *Get Behind Me, Self*, wrote that the New Testament has three distinct incarnations of evil. The first is what is called the devil. The second incarnation of evil is the ways, or values, of the world. The third is the desires of our own flesh. Care to guess which one is referenced the most in the New Testament. If you said the third – our own flesh – you are correct. Taking the New Testament in its entirety, there is actually very little mention of the devil. The ways of the world are discussed in pretty good order but, again, Scripture focuses us on the desires of our flesh as the number one way we can get tripped up in our walk with Christ.

This sermon has taken me about 21 years to deliver. Prior to seminary, I believed there was God and that people were either facing God, walking towards God, or walking away. Once I started studying, and perhaps more importantly, started doing ministry in the world, I had a distinct sense that there was a pull away from God. Number one, the pull is on the desires of our flesh. Secondly, it pulls the way/values of the world, and third, it is the devil.

If you take the New Testament as literature – as a book telling a story – there is a shift in one of the characters. The devil is a constant figure in the first four books, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It terrorizes people, enslaves and mistreats people, inhabits them and creates sickness and disease. Jesus taught his followers to cast it out but there was a time, or perhaps more, where only Jesus could cure (cast out) the evil one. Then there is a massive shift. Something happened on Good Friday. Easter Sunday (resurrection day) and beyond, shows that the devil can be cast out by his followers and will leave if resisted by faith, acts of love and forgiveness, as well as bringing joy and peace. Again, the New Testament as literature shows that Jesus apprehended the evil one and gives us authority to use his name.

That's the New Testament as literature; here is how I have experienced it in ministry. I met a Vestry member at a coffee shop near his work, the Naval Air Station on the Island of Coronado, just west of San Diego. We had an amazing conversation that was, come to find out, life changing for him. On the way back to the church I found myself tailgating the car in front of me as we started across the Coronado Bridge. I was getting angry and angrier and, at one point, used a swear word. As I heard the word echo in the car and then in my ears, I thought, *something is not right with me, I normally don't do this*. Near the top of the bridge span, I prayed: In the name of Jesus, I bind, silence and remove whatever has attached itself to me. Be gone. Within seconds, I started feeling like my own self. I then praised God all the way back to my church office.

I have had many meetings like that one – important discussions about faith and commitment – and this had not happened to me. It's like something jumped on to me, like a flu virus; but, it was easily removed with a simple prayer.

As you can imagine, I didn't make that prayer up on the spot. I've learned how to do it. ... because this can happen from time to time but it is very infrequent, thanks be to God. I have talked with someone who had two different, and at times, competing, voices emanating from them. At my first church in San Diego, two people showed up in the afternoon. Something told me to get into the church, which I did, and they would not follow me inside and quickly left. There have been a couple of other things but, in 18 years of ordained life and 3 years in seminary, this is about it. A bulk of my ministry time with people has been spent on talking about the desires of one's own flesh and how to walk daily with Christ.

You might wonder, what about the second category of evil – the ways of the world. I believe that Jesus set up ministry, the Church, as an answer to it. The world says that the one who dies with the most toys wins. The Church says we are to focus on helping others. The world says we should distrust others and seek vengeance on those who have wronged us. The Church teaches us to trust one another, to forgive as we have been forgiven, and to share with others in need.

The world has changed a lot since Jesus's time in the first century. Let's look at slavery; it has greatly diminished in the past two thousand years. We have a way to go, but, quoting Martin Luther King Jr., "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The Church, established by Jesus and the apostles and handed on to us, is the response to the ways of the world.

The last, and most prevalent stumbling block is the desires of our flesh. Something happened on Good Friday to Easter Sunday. The result is that the cross has set us free. It has empowered us to resist the devil and, when we do, the devil flees. The cross has established the Church to be place of teaching and fellowship to stand against the ways of the world. The cross has set us free from the desires of our flesh as a way to carry our cross daily and follow Him who died for us and rose again.

Think of it this way: Hollywood likes to make epic battles of evil and forces of good. That's fine for movies, but, in reality, there is no giant battle – the cross has set us free. What is laid out before us however is a daily walk, a daily slog, if you will, following Christ. Hollywood won't make a movie out of it but I have experienced it, first hand, as being the single transforming power in this world. The person who prays in the morning, reads a little Scripture and, from time to time during the day, reflects on it. The person who gives thanks for meals and finally, when the head hits the pillow, to offer a simple prayer of asking for forgiveness and thanking the Creator of all things, seen and unseen. That daily practice is transformative. It changes lives.

For every baptism and confirmation we have at church, I ask three questions that come straight out of the Book of Common Prayer:

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

Now you see the three-fold approach that Jen Wilken had named in her article. The one we deal with most, on a day to day basis is the last one – do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God.

At the same service, I ask everyone to renew their commitment to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. I then ask: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

That question, and the affirmative response; I will with God's help; is the daily walk with Christ. The apostles taught us to forgive as we have been forgiven. That the world will know us because of the love we have for one another. To pray for those who want to do us harm. To share with those in need. The daily walk is in the fellowship with the apostles. Fellowship – the apostles didn't all get along or agree with each other on everything, yet, they had fellowship together. The ways of the world would want the Church to divide along political lines, but we don't because of the apostle's fellowship and teaching. We are one as the Lord is One. We don't have to think alike or even vote alike but we have fellowship and love with one another. The Lord is One. The cross has set us free to have fellowship with one another and to continue in the apostles' teaching.

Will you continue in the breaking of the bread? Last week, Linda spoke to us about our pledge drive and said that her spiritual battery runs low during the week. Sunday is the day that recharges her battery so she can continue in the world during the week. The breaking of the bread is the worship once a week that feeds us. Lastly, will you continue in the prayers? The cross invites us to pray, without ceasing, to the loving God who restores and guides us. The daily walk with Christ is to pray daily. For me, I have to pray many times a day. But that's my walk, yours might be different. But, we are to continue in prayer.

The cross has set us free from the tyranny of the day that says our lives don't matter. Prayer reminds us that God loves us, listens to us, responds to us, and that we are responsible for praying for one another. Pray changes things. Thanks be to God.