Sunday, February 27, 1972
CASTING OUT DEMONS
Luke 11:14-28

The miracle which we are looking at today as part of our Lenten series is very brief in form, one of the shortest reports of all the miracles of Jesus. Listen again to the one sentence which reports the event: “Now Jesus was casting out a demon that was dumb; and when the demon had gone out, the dumb man spoke, and the people marveled.” That’s all there is to the report of the miracle itself. But then there follows a kind of debate and argument with some of the people who witnessed the miracle, coupled with a collection of sayings of Jesus. To the Gospel writer and to those who remembered the miracle, these sayings and teachings are an important part of the whole episode.

In order to better understand this Bible passage, let’s first attempt to reconstruct what happened. First, note that not everyone who observed the casting out of the demon was impressed. Some were amazed, but others who saw it immediately accused Jesus of being in partnership with the devil. They said to Jesus, “You have the power of the devil within you, and that’s why you are able to cast out this demon.” Still others, also not impressed, said, “Your casting out a demon, your healing this man, is really not very important. We want more dramatic and sensational proof that you are the Son of God.”

In answering these critics, Jesus showed them how foolish and false their logic and thinking were. Would Satan be dumb enough to cast out Satan? Would the devil fight against himself? Jesus asked. Furthermore, Jesus said, “If I cast out demons by the prince of demons, then by what power do you and your followers cast them out? Are you also saying that you are in league with the devil?” But, continued Jesus, if I cast out demons, if I heal by God’s power, then the Kingdom of God is truly among you. So, you had better make a choice right now — for he who is not with me is against me.”

Then Jesus went on to talk about the danger of a vacuum in a person’s mind and life, using a short parable. He said that when some evil comes out of a person, that person may falsely think that all is now well, his life is clean, his house is empty, the job is completed, so he can rest and take it easy. But, said Jesus, be careful, for what usually happens is that the evil returns and, now finding the house all nice and clean and empty, it brings seven other spirits with it, and they occupy the emptiness so that the person’s present condition is worse than it was before.

At this point in the discussion with the people who had witnessed the miracle, one woman in the group tried to change the subject and called out to Jesus, “O what a blessing for a woman to have been your mother and to have brought you into the world and nursed you.” But Jesus replied to her, “Yes, but a far greater blessing to hear the word of God and obey it.” With this, the gospel writer ends the episode and discussion around the miracle of casting out the demon.

Now, as we have noted, the miracle event in and of itself, important as it is, is also used as a kind of prelude and introduction for some very important sayings and teachings of Jesus. So, this morning, we want to take this passage piece by piece and see what it has to say to us.

Let's begin with the opening statement: "Now Jesus was casting out a demon." More than any other kind of healing, Jesus cast out demons, curing people of infirmities that were attributed to evil spirits. There are a large number of reports of this kind of incident in the New Testament. In this case, there was a man who could not speak. Whether he was born this way or not, we do not know; or whether he had had some kind of stroke later in life, we do not know. We do know that in that day and age, the loss of speech, or sight, or hearing, or being crippled, was many times attributed to an outside, external power that had taken hold of the person. It was called a demon, an evil spirit, and was thought to be related to the whole kingdom of evil of which the devil himself was king.

In our time, we do not often describe handicaps, loss of speech, sight, or some other disability in this way. At the same time, there is in our time a new interest in demonology, witchcraft, and Satanism. Movies like The Devils and Rosemary's Baby are examples. In Los Angeles, there is a Church of St. Satan, and the pastor of the First Church of Satan in San Francisco has written his own satanic bible. There are estimated to be some 6,000 witches' covens in this country using both white and black magic.

Before we laugh all this off as being something like undergraduate fun and games, we might remember some sobering facts, such as the hideous ritual murders of Sharon Tate and her friends and the evidence of Satanism in action that has accompanied other grisly crimes in recent months.

At the end of Rosemary's Baby, the witch leader shouts in triumph: "God is dead! God is dead and Satan lives!" That is fiction, but what is not fiction are the remarks of the Satanic pastor, quoted in Look magazine last year.

"There is a demon inside man. It must be exercised, not exorcized — channeled into ritualized hatred."

What's going on in all of this? I don't know. I'm not an authority on the occult. I am sure, however, that the time for ignoring it or laughing it off is over. For too long, maybe, we've lived with a comfortable, rationalized religion, leaving the mystic, the emotional, and what we call the "spooky" to the ecclesiastical underworld.

Now, I'm not advocating that we throw away all that modern psychology has taught us and revert to crude beliefs in devils with horns and tails. Nor am I pleading for a return to the days of hellfire preaching and the persecution of witches. What I am getting at is well put by the late C.S. Lewis in the preface to his masterpiece, The Screwtape Letters:

"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

Our mistake may be to be so scared of this morbid preoccupation with demons that we have eliminated an entire area of the authentic gospel.

We have been trained to dismiss the demonic element in the Bible as part of a primitive outlook which we have outgrown. Part of the problem is that the New Testament witness to Satan and the power of darkness is given in symbolism and imagery never intended for the literal interpretation of the Western mind.

When Jesus said, “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven,” he was speaking, as he often did, in the language of poetry and vision. At the same time, however, he was taking the fact of the power of evil in this world and universe very seriously. The struggle of Jesus with the powers of evil is echoed throughout his ministry. For him, the cosmic struggle against the powers of evil was no mere metaphor.

The implication clearly is that the mission of Jesus meant more than the eradication of human faults and failings, more than the proposal of an ideal of conduct, more even than the provision of life. He clearly believed that evil resides not only in the wrong choices that we make but has a superhuman dimension. It was exactly this thought that Paul expressed when he wrote that our fight is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavens (Ephesians 6:12).

In the past, it has often been particularly hard for the American Christian to take this kind of talk seriously. For we lived, as Reinhold Niebuhr used to point out, with the myth of innocence. We were sure that man is fundamentally good and only needed some sensible Christian guidance to attain the Utopia to which the world was surely moving.

What has shattered and disturbed the soul of the modern United States is the discovery that this is not the world we are living in. We are having to accept the unbelievable — that such things as ritual murders, meaningless atrocities, wanton destruction, My Lai, happen among us. So often, in recent years, men of good intention have been destroyed by the very forces they sought to control.

All of this is simply to say that there is a reality to evil. There is a dark side to the universe, a kind of chaotic element which seems everywhere present and lurking. There is a force which is the opposite of love, the opposite of wholeness and health, the opposite of that which is opposed to what we are meant to be.

So, the man in this story and in many others is said to have a demon because he could not speak. He was not as he should be, or as God would have liked him to be. Jesus changes the situation. It was an act of God, an act of goodness on his part — a sign of God’s power over the chaotic; a sign that God can and will make all things new.

But what happened after the man was healed? Some people marveled, but others said, “This is the devil himself at work. He casts out the demon because he is in partnership with the devil.”
People are pretty much confused when they call that which is God, the devil; that which is good, evil. How could these persons misinterpret this act of Jesus? A man has been helped. He has been healed, but some could not see any good in it at all, but just the opposite. And still others standing around there could see nothing much at all. They wanted to see something more sensational, more dramatic, and more spectacular.

People still confuse good with evil. People still ascribe good actions to evil motives. We still like to pin labels on things in order to discredit them. We quickly call someone a conservative or a liberal or a hippie or attach some other label in order to bring discredit. Often, if we don’t like what we see, or if we disagree with what we see, we call it a name or say it is the work of the devil or that which is opposed to the good. That’s what the people were doing who saw Jesus heal the man.

Not too many years ago, we all heard people say that the whole movement toward equality of the races, toward racial integration, was the work of the devil. Some didn't use the word devil but said instead that it was "communist-inspired," and by that, they meant it was evil.

In other places in the New Testament, such labeling is called the unforgivable sin — blasphemy against the Holy Spirit — calling that which is of God the work of the devil.

In a similar way, I am told that not too many years ago, respectable church people denounced as evil and opposed the efforts made in the first ravages of the industrial revolution in England to protect women and little children from death-dealing labor in mines and factories. "Pass laws," they said, "to keep 9- and 10-year-olds and others from working 14 to 16 hours a day — that's the work of the devil." During the time of slavery in this country, respectable church people defended the right to hold slaves and spoke out with strong hate against those who would abolish slavery. The abolitionists were in league with the devil himself.

What this story from the Bible is trying to point out is that we all fall prey to the temptation to call that which is good, evil. Whenever our own little kingdoms, our own little systems and prejudices are under attack, then we call those who oppose us — evil! Be careful, says Jesus, that which looks to you at the moment like the work of the devil may, in fact, be God at work!

Then Jesus went on to point out to his critics that it's false to think that Satan can cast out Satan. In other words, it's false to think that evil can be overcome by the use of evil's power and methods, by the use of more evil.

Yet throughout history, mankind has again and again been led astray by thinking that we can use evil to cast out evil. Can we get rid of cruelty by using more cruelty? Can we get rid of lying by telling more lies? Can we do away with repression by using repressive methods? Can we get rid of cheating by cheating? Evil produces only more of its own kind.

The episode surrounding this healing miracle closes with a brief parable. Jesus said, "When the evil spirit comes out of a man and goes looking for a new place to rest, it often comes back to its point of origin, and when it arrives, it finds the place cleaned, all in order, and empty. Then it goes and collects seven other spirits eviler than itself to keep it company, and they all go in and make themselves at home, and the last state of the man is worse than the first."

It's a warning to all of us. It is not enough just to be rid of some evil tendency or to reach some plateau and think, "Now I've got it made." It's just at that point that we are most vulnerable, and then the first tendency that we were rid of returns and brings others with it, and we are worse off than before. Evil loves a vacuum.

The miracle story and the collection of sayings which surround it come to an end when a woman in the crowd calls out in an attempt to flatter Jesus and perhaps change the subject— "What a blessing for a woman to have brought you into the world and nursed you." Jesus' reply is a fitting end to the episode and to this sermon— "Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and keep it." Amen.