Sunday, March 25, 1984

"DEMONS AND DELIVERANCE" Luke 11:14-28

The miracle story we are considering today as part of our Lenten series is quite brief in its narrative form, one of the shortest reports of all the miracle stories from the time of Jesus. It's only one long sentence - - "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 an argument with some of the people who witnessed the event and after that a collection of sayings of Jesus. These teachings are an important part of the whole episode. As I mentioned in the first sermon in this series--the miracle stories were not only remembered because of the events themselves, but also because of what the events taught.

In order to better understand this incident and the teachings surrounding it, let's first attempt to reconstruct what happened. First, note that not everyone who witnessed the casting out of the dumb spirit 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 demons and heal people". Still others, not impressed, said, "Your casting out a demon, your healing this individual is not actually very important. We want more dramatic proof that you are indeed the Son of God."

In answering these critics, Jesus showed them how foolish and false their thinking was. Jesus asked, "Would the devil be stupid enough to cast out devils? Would the devil fight against itself?" Futhermore said Jesus, "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 presence of God is truly among you. So you had better make a choice now, for those who are not with me are against me."

Then Jesus went on to talk about the danger of a vacuum in a persons' mind and life by 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 or her life is clean, the house is empty, the job is completed. But said Jesus, be careful for what usually happens is that the evil returns and now finds the house all nice and clean and empty and 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 crowd shouted 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 sidestepped this flattery by replying, "Yes, but a far greater blessing to hear the word of God and obey it."

As I have stated before, events like these, important as they are in and of themselves, are also used by the Gospel writers as the setting for some very important teachings of Jesus. With that in mind, let's look at the story in more detail.

1. Let's begin with the opening sentence of the story- "Now Jesus was casting out a demon." More than any other kind of healing reported in the New Testament, is the casting out of various kinds of demons. Or to put it another way--Jesus cured many people of infirmities that were attributed to alien spirits.

In this case there was a man who did not have the ability to speak. Whether he was born that way; or whether he had had some kind of stroke, or some other physical or mental problem that caused him to lose the power of speech, 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 individual. It was called a demon, or an alien spirit and some believed that such demons were part of a larger kingdom of evil with the devil as ruler.

In our time we do not often describe such physical handicaps or disabilities in this way. We know that there is no simple cause and effect relationship between evil or sin and physical handicaps. Jesus himself

emphasized this point. One day a man was brought to him who had been born blind, and they asked Jesus, "Who sinned that this person was born blind, this man or his parents?" And Jesus answered that neither was the case. However this does not mean that evil or sin does not exist, or even that there may be isolated cases of an individual being possessed by Evil. In fact in his new book, "PEOPLE OF THE LIE, The Hope for Healing Human Evil," Dr. M. Scott Peck, a practicing psychiatrist, and a Christian, gives several examples of patients which he is convinced were possessed by evil or an evil spirit or demon, and in two cases he writes that he was privileged to be present at their successful exorcisms.

However, Dr. Peck also warns while human evil is quite common, genuine possession as far as we know is very rare. And he goes on to say that the diagnosis of possession is not an easy one to make, that is, the symptoms are not easily recognizable. It is as if the individual has several personalities of which he or she is aware and the secondary personality is revealed to be blatantly evil.

He goes on to say that in the two cases with which he dealt, even though both demonstrated blatantly evil secondary personalities, they were not evil people, that is, he never experienced them as evil. In fact, the core personality of each seemed not only healthy, but unusually good and potentially saintly. Dr. Peck goes on to speculate that the potential holiness of these two people was one of the reasons for their possession. In other words the power of evil wants to get the best persons possible to do its work. The most talented, the most charismatic, the most intelligent, those who have the ability to accomplish the most good, and the most vulnerable.

The point is that evil or demon possession is not the best way to describe various physical and mental disabilities. To describe someone as being possessed by an evil spirit is to describe the kind of person who has let himself or herself be possessed by an evil power which seeks to control that life so that an individual becomes destructive. Remember above all that in the Bible evil is often difficult to recognize because it is so deceptive and usually masquerades as the"good."

I believe that Jesus took the power of evil very seriously and that he saw it at work in what society often thought of as being the best people. The struggle of Jesus with the powers of evil is echoed throughout his ministry. Jesus believed that evil resides not only in the wrong choices we make, but has a superhuman dimension. It was exactly this thought that St. 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)

But now back to the story about Jesus healing a man who could not speak. No matter how we might describe the cause of his handicap in today's terms, the fact is that after meeting Jesus, he could speak, so that the healing was an act of goodness, an act of love and compassion. It was also seen as a sign of God's power, a sign that God can make all things new.

But what happened after the man was healed? Some people were filled with a sense of awe, but others said, "This is the devil himself at work. He casts out demons because he is in partnership with the devil."

We human beings are very confused when we call that which is of God, the devil; that which is good, evil. How could these people misinterpret this act of Jesus? An individual had been healed, but some could not see any good in this action, but just the opposite. And still others who observed what had happened said it wasn't important, they wanted to see something more sensational or dramatic.

It's easy to confuse good with evil. It happens all the time. We still like to pin labels on things in order to discredit them. We quickly call someone a conservative or a liberal or a communist sympathizer or a radical or a right-winger or left-winger in order to discredit them.

Not too many years ago the enemies of the movement toward integration and racial justice called that whole movement the work of the devil. Some didn't use the word devil, but said that it was "Communist Inspired." and by that meant that it was evil.

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 with labor in mines and factories. Pass laws, they said, to keep 9 and 10 year olds and others from working in the factories 14 to 16 hours a day--that's the work of the devil.

When slavery was opposed in this country, respectable church people defended the practice of holding slaves and said that the abolitionalists were in league with the devil himself.

What this story in the Bible is pointing out is that we all fall prey to the temptation to call what is good, evil. Whenever 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 among you.

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

Yet throughout history, we human beings have 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 be rid of cheating by cheating? Can we be rid of dictators by supporting dictators? The use of evil produces only more of its own kind.

Can we be rid of killing by killing? Can we be rid of hate, by becoming hateful? Evil is more difficult to overcome than we sometimes think. To illustrate this point, Jesus told a brief parable to those who had witnessed the healing of the man who could not speak. He said, "When an evil spirit comes out of someone and goes looking for a new place to inhabit, 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 more evil than itself to keep it company and they all go in and make themselves at home and now the condition of the individual is worse than it was before."

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

An empty life, an empty faith is an invitation to trouble. We learned in physics that nature abhors a vacuum. Something is always rushing in to fill it and it may be something we do not want.

The only answer is to fill the vacuum with something positive, something good.

This miracle story and the collection of sayings which surround it in Luke comes to an end, when a woman in the crowd called out in an attempt to flatter Jesus and perhaps change the subject--she said, "O 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. He said, "Blessed, rather are those who hear the word of God and Keep It." Amen.