

The Case of the Sarcastic Demon

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Biblical Text: Acts 16:16-22

It's fun to be here. It's fun to play tennis, to go swimming, to sit around and tell jokes with old friends and new acquaintances. But above all, let us confess, it is fun because it gives us a chance to get away from it all. To get away from funerals and finances, from counseling sessions and committee meetings. To get away from people who think that, because our task is to proclaim the word of God, we must have an answer to all their questions and all their doubts.

It is difficult to be a minister in our time. We are supposed to be proclaiming the bright vision of God's plan of Shalom. Yet our own vision is dimmed, and Shalom is hard to come by these days.

We are all aware of the evil realities of our time: unjust distribution of wealth, international and national economic systems that make that distribution even more unjust; political oppression; sexist and racist discrimination; increasing world hunger at a time of unprecedented agricultural abundance; ecological decay...

The list could go on and on. Drugs in our schools, gunfights on our streets, apartheid in Africa, something very much like it in Israel, and on, and on, and on, ... like the Energizer rabbit.

Even as we come here to get away from it all, we know that we cannot really get away. Or

perhaps we come, not to get away, but rather looking for new answers. And yet suspecting that we have already heard all the answers. We come hoping against hope, with an overwhelming sense of frustration and bewilderment. We do not see easy solutions to all the problems that besiege us. Although shipping tons of grain overseas may keep people from starving, and therefore is an act of Christian compassion, it hardly addresses the fundamental causes of world hunger. We could try the route of education, thinking that the problems of the world will be solved by better schooling – and there is no doubt that there is positive value in education – but we shall soon discover that often the better educated use that very training as a means to exploit and subjugate others.

In one word, before the problem of evil in our time we stand perplexed. Perhaps there was a time thirty or forty years ago when we would boldly have ventured into simple solutions to these problems. Perhaps there was a time when we really believed that there could be “a war to end all wars.” But today we no longer believe such myths. Today, as we look at the problems around us, we are overawed by their complexity, by their interconnection, by their magnitude, by our inability really to grapple with them.

This has many consequences for our lives as Christians today. But one such consequence – and a very unexpected one – is that we are beginning to sense something of what the Bible means when it speaks of demons. I am not saying that we can somehow jump back twenty centuries, forget about germs, psychoses, and hormones, and speak naively as if evil spirits floating in the

air were the cause of all our plagues and problems.

What I am saying is that, in the midst of our perplexity before our own most urgent problems, we can empathize with a view that sees evil, not only as something which we ourselves create and can therefore manage, but also as something of such magnitude and mysterious complexity that we are unable to grapple with it in an effective manner. And, after all, that is, at least in part, what is meant by the Biblical imagery regarding demons. In some ways, the mysterious giants of economic injustice, ecological upheaval, and international conflict are much more demonic and fearsome than some little devil floating around with horns and a pitchfork.

Thus, if it is true that most of us have left behind a view of the world as populated by demons and other such powers, it is also true that we must now leave behind our optimistic and simplistic views of a few years ago, when we thought that some technological or ideological fix was around the corner.

It is still true that we cannot escape responsibility for our world and for our future. We cannot simply say, "The Devil made me do it." But it is also true that the more seriously we take our responsibility the more we tend to be perplexed by the overpowering complexity and magnitude of evil.

At this juncture, then, it may be well to look again at what the New Testament, and specifically

the book of Acts, has to say about how we are to face the demonic forces that are loose upon the world. It may well be that some of its insights may help us understand the nature of our Christian struggle against such demons as economic injustice, ecological encroachment, and the like.

This I invite you to do on the basis of two texts from the book of Acts. The first text is from Acts 16:16-22 [Revised Standard Version]:

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. She followed Paul and us, crying, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers; and when they had brought them to the magistrates they said, "These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in attacking them; and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods.

The action in this text is fairly clear. A slave girl is possessed by a demon who is the source of her divining powers. Evidently, the demon causes her to follow Paul and his group crying out the truth about who they are. Paul does not care for this, however, and performs an exorcism. The demon leaves the girl, who is no longer a source of financial gain to her masters. They are annoyed, and have Paul and Silas beaten and put in prison.

The second text comes from Acts 19:13-16 [Revised Standard Version]:

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

This is not a text that is often used in contemporary preaching. Probably the problem is not that it deals with demons. We have heard quite a number of sermons on demons – especially on TV – but not on this text. The reason for this may well be that here we have to deal with a sarcastic demon, and most people who are inclined to preach on demons do not have a very keen sense of humor!

The story as the book of Acts tells it is simple, yet poignant. Paul had been preaching for two years at Ephesus. His main function there was not exorcism. His function was the preaching of the Gospel. But that preaching was accompanied by such signs that some itinerant exorcists thought that the name of Jesus could somehow be added to their professional bag of tricks, as a specially powerful one. So, they went into this house, seven exorcists together, and attempted to cast out a demon with a strangely noncommittal formula: "I adjure you in the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches." To which the demon responded, with marked sarcasm: "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" [Acts 19: 15] (Or, in a freer translation: "Jesus I know; and Paul I know; but who the devil are you?") And then, to add not insult to injury, but injury to insult, the man in whom the demon was jumped on them and gave them a sound thrashing. There are a number of obvious parallelisms and contrasts between these two texts. The most

obvious contrast is that in one case the exorcism succeeds and in the other it fails. The seven sons of Sceva cannot cast out the demon, whereas Paul causes the demon to leave the slave girl.

Secondly, there is a contrast between the two formulae that are used: In the one case: “I adjure you by the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches;” in the other, Paul says: “I charge you in the name of Jesus.” The first formula is second-hand; the second is direct. The first formula acknowledges the power of the name, but keeps it at a distance, so as not to submit to it. The second is both a command to the demon and a confession of faith. Both acknowledge the power of the name of Jesus; both call on that power; but one places the speaker under that power, and the other does not.

Also, in both cases the power of the evil acknowledges the power of the Gospel. The sarcastic demon responds to the sons of Sceva: “Jesus I know; and Paul I know.” The demon of divination follows Paul and his companions crying: “These people are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” Parenthetically, it should be noted in passing that, even though the words of the demon are true, Paul is annoyed, and the exorcism stops the witness of the demon. There are witnesses which it is best not to have. (Trujillo: “Jesus is the unseen host at our table, the silent participant in our conversation” [Chiang Kai-Shek, Rios-Montt]).

A fourth parallelism: Both passages from Acts conclude with beatings. In the failed exorcism, the

man with the sarcastic demon jumps on the seven would-be exorcists, and they flee the house naked and wounded. In the case of Paul and his companions, the owners of the slave girl bring charges against them, and they are also undressed and whipped. It may also be noted in passing that the violence in the case of the sarcastic demon is merely a private incident, whereas the violence in the case of Paul and his companions is legalized violence. Furthermore, it is legalized illegal violence, for Paul was a Roman citizen, and the very first law of ancient Rome was that a Roman citizen could not be beaten. Paul knows his rights, but does not press them until the next day, when he uses them to lay bare the injustice that has been done. (Parenthetically, again, it is interesting to note that we all know that Paul was in jail in Philippi, and that there was an earthquake, and that the jailer was converted. But very seldom do we hear why Paul was in jail to begin with...economic interests...)

Finally, a fifth parallelism: both cases lead to unexpected results in terms of witness – beyond the brief sections that were read. In the case of the demon-possessed girl, the jailer and his family come to faith and are baptized. After the section we have read on the defeated exorcists, many Christians who had evidently kept some of their old magic books brought them out and burned them. Perhaps they had not yet been convinced that they should rely totally on God, and not on their older practices. Faith was strengthened in both cases.

From all of this, we can draw at least two important conclusions about the workings of evil and the power of the gospel to overcome it.

In the first place, suffering, or the lack of it, are not necessarily an indication that one is on the side of the gospel or on the side of evil. The sons of Sceva are beaten, and so are Paul and Silas. The sons of Sceva are left naked, and Paul and Silas are stripped of their garments. The sons of Sceva flee, and Paul and Silas end up in jail (Hebrews 11:32-38). Meanwhile, the demons are possessing two people about whose personal goodness or evil we are told nothing. In fact, their only claim to fame is to have been possessed by demons.

Indeed, there are more demonic forces at work here than simply the individualistic issue of two demons possessing two people. There is also the no less demonic force of some people owning a girl, and exploiting her suffering for their own gain. Even after she is freed of her demon, she is not freed of her owners. We are not told what happens to her thereafter; but we can guess. There is a demonic force that eventually lands Paul and Silas in jail, for it is the girl's owners, deprived of their gain, who bring up false charges before the magistrates. Actually, the demon was more truthful than the slave-owners, for the demon declared what Paul and his companions truly were, while the slave-owners brought up charges that have nothing to do with their true grievances. Thus, the not-so-good Roman order, which allows for slavery, is further corrupted by the demon of vested economic interest, which uses that order to its own end, to the point that the magistrates end up breaking Roman law.

Secondly, although being acquainted with evil is no sign of goodness or lack of it, there is a way

of being acquainted with evil which is powerful – a power acknowledged even by the demons. The sarcastic demon declares: “Jesus I know; and Paul I know.” The powers of evil are acquainted with Jesus, and even acknowledge his power. This is a theme which it may be difficult for us to envisage, but which runs throughout the entire New Testament. One might even dare say that this theme is central to the New Testament, whose message is obscured without it. For what the New Testament says is not simply that Jesus was a great teacher, nor simply that he died for our sins, nor simply that he performed miracles. The most important thing that the New Testament says about Jesus is that throughout his life and death he faced the strongest forces evil could muster, and he conquered them all. Evil may still be running rampant in the world. But its ultimate force has been taken away, in that One has already conquered it.

It may be difficult for us to see this. It may be difficult for conceptual reasons, since this is not our normal way of thinking. It may also be difficult because it is not often that we see around us signs that a new era has indeed dawned. It may be difficult, but it stands at the very core of the Christian faith. If we do not somehow believe and experience this, and are willing to stake our lives on it, our relationship to the fundamental events of the New Testament is little more than hearsay and second-hand, like those exorcists who felt compelled to disassociate themselves from those events by saying: “the Jesus whom Paul preaches.”

Our difficulty is partly caused by the oddity of the situation in which we find ourselves: we

confess that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has overcome the powers of sin and evil that have held our world in their grip. At the same time, we live in a world that seems to go on, still under the power of sin, as though nothing had happened. There are moments when that victory breaks through and there are times when the old order is strong, and only faith can proclaim the victory of Christ. Faith knows how to deal with both occasions.

The account of the sarcastic demon seems quite contrary to what we might assume. The conventional wisdom is that if there are demonic powers it would be best for Christians to stay at arm's length from them unacquainted and not crossing paths!

But here, in this passage, the demonic power knows Jesus and knows Paul. The powerlessness of the would-be exorcists lies in the fact that they are not known by the demon. Not only does the evil spirit know Jesus and Paul, they are very clearly respected.

The Jesus whom Paul preaches is the Jesus who takes on evil, who wrestles with it and ultimately conquers it. It is the Jesus of Gethsemane and the Cross of hard-won victories over evil. The Paul who preaches this Jesus is not one who stands on the sidelines and bids evil leave, but rather the Paul who also takes on evil, who suffers for what he preaches, who knows that the way to victory over evil is the way of the cross and no other. He writes to the Corinthians: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the

death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” (II Cor. 4:8-10). Of course the demonic powers know Jesus and they know Paul.

What this means is that the only way to overcome evil with the power of the gospel is to be acquainted with evil. The itinerant exorcists are trying to have victory over evil with no cross – no engagement with evil. That will not do. In fact, they are in far worse shape when they leave the attempted exorcism than when they begin it.

Nor are they alone. How often have we been quite clear as to what is demonic in our corporate life and attempted to be rid of it by standing on the sidelines, remaining unacquainted with evil ourselves hoping that evil will not come to know us and invoking the name of “Jesus whom Paul preaches,” only to discover that evil remains strong and mocks our powerlessness.

There could be many examples of this. But one comes immediately to mind. We are worried about an impending ecological disaster, and rightly so. So, our bishops issue an excellent statement on the integrity of creation and our responsibility for it. But do we as a church reorganize our priorities? Are we ready to say to the polluters among our major contributors, as Simon Peter would have said, “your silver perish with you?” Do we look at our entire church program, to see how we ourselves could be less wasteful? Do we stop running and flying from meeting to meeting, like chickens with their heads cut off? Do we even change the plastic cups we use for our coffee breaks?

So, not surprisingly, the world reads our bishops' statement, nods its head sagely, "excellent," it says, "well thought out," and then it yawns. "Jesus I know, and Paul I know. They not only have something to say. They are an example worth following. But, the United Methodist Church?"

After such encounters, we may find our own faith sorely tried, and decide that it really makes little difference in this world. These unfortunate exorcists could have told us that!

The name of Jesus is a powerful weapon against evil, but only when uttered on the way to the cross. To be personally unacquainted with evil is not a strength, but rather a sign of the lack of engagement. Paul had real power over evil, because he not only preached Jesus, but followed him. The victory over evil he proclaimed was the victory Jesus had gained. Our attacks on all that is demonic in our world cannot be conducted from the safety of the religious sidelines. Even with his success over the demon that possessed the girl, Paul and his friend end up beaten by order of the magistrates, and imprisoned.

Either we are acquainted with evil, or we shall have no power over it. This seems like a terrible choice to have to make. But in reality, it is no choice at all. For acquainted with the powers of evil we shall be. The question is not whether or not evil will assail us, but whether or not we shall be able to see in that encounter the means whereby we can share in the power and the victory of Jesus Christ.

For in this lies our hope. Not every once in a while, when things seem to get too tough, we have an opportunity to come to a place such as this. Not in that our bishops' statements will somehow change the world. But in that Jesus Christ, our Lord in whom we trust and in whom we live, was himself acquainted with evil, and therefore was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell itself; who, just before he was betrayed, asked his disciples if they could drink of the cup of which he was about to drink; who on the night on which he was betrayed took the cup and said, "this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood;" who on the third day he rose again from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of Almighty God, from whence he shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. So be it!

