

## Sermon 071121 Deliver us from Evil

Years ago, as part of the ordination requirements I had to spend several days at Princeton Theological Seminary undergoing a battery of psychological tests and interviews...to make sure I was not only theologically sound but psychological intact as well....(I expect some of you might be wondering if they all missed something... but I did get the “fit for ministry” OKAY. The only comment the psychologist gave me was that I might be excessively cheerful or optimistic person.... Trying to see the positive in everything....In fact she called me a Pollyanna type...the kind who works hard at seeing just the positive...in life.

"Maybe she was saying that I was some aging Pollyanna who just wants to pretend that all is sweetness and light" I don't know... but I have to tell you... I could not find one good thing about the middle part of the our scripture reading... the one Jeff read...

I could not detect a single note of the positive.. there is no hope...no joy...it's awful.... no saving grace... just a wretched story.... It's not the part of the sermon, you'd say “thanks be to God”. ... and further my guess is ... my bet is that you've never heard this preached... maybe you've read it in some Bible Study... but it's a passage you want to avoid... I've done pretty at it...trying to avoid for 20 some years...but the gig is up and I'm forced to tackle it. And I don't think that we

would do justice to this morning's reading if we were read it out of context... for the understanding of this passage...comes more from the place it's found ..more from the content... So let's tackle this oh so gruesome story....This horrendous, awful passage is sandwiched between 2 wonderful... uplifting stories... The first story is about how Jesus commissions his disciples to go out in pairs heal people.... Which they do and with great success.... As we find out in our second story..... they are all excited about all the good deeds and healing and casting out demons.. Can you find a better story? Of course not.... It's lovely

Yet in the midst of all the good stuff... there's this horrific story of the beheading of John the Baptist...at a party of all things..and where does this occur ...at the high levels of government... of society...While the poor disciples of Jesus are out doing good works... evil pops its ugly head at what should have been a royal party. As is usually true...there is a back story about the evil committed at that banquet. It seems that Herod ..who himself is a Jew and serves as the puppet king for the Roman Empire...has got himself into quite a pickle ... (now this Herod is Herod Antipas) it seems that he has taken a liking (perhaps a bit more than a bit liking to Herodias who happened to be his step brother's wife....and she married Herod Antipas while she was still married to Herod's brother, Philip... and to complicate matters.... Philip refuses to divorce her...so according to Jewish law... he (Herod) had committed a grave offensive... which the prophet John the Baptist.... Who

was pretty popular in his day... he had condemned this marriage...as evil.. because it was opposed to the Jewish law....and John the Baptist had publicly condemned both Herod and Herodias...Plot thickens...

Herodias ... she's mad and she wants to knock off John the Baptist... but Herod is not inclined to do that... in fact John the Baptist interests him... so according to historians, Herod has John the Baptist arrested... in part to protect John against any of Herodias henchmen who might try to kill John...

Then Herodias devises a plot that involves using Herodias young early teen daughter... Salome... in a kind sexual way... which is really creepy ....she has her dance before Herod and when she does... he becomes enamored with Salome...so taken with her that he, Herod... promises her whatever she wants for her birthday... and her mother Herodias... prompts her to say.... John the Baptist' head on a platter. Herod does not want to lose face or power so against his wishes....he grants her that horrific, hideous and horrible request. Herod's position and reputation have become more valuable than the great prophet's life. It has been said that sin will take you farther than you want to go; it will keep you longer than you want to stay and cost you more than you want to pay. (Repeat)This was certainly the case for Herod. His desire for Herodias ultimately led him to an unjust execution of a prophet of God. In the end he determined that it was a better option

to kill John the Baptist than to disappoint his wife and appear indecisive in front of his peers. ( "A Message the World Hates: The Cost of Discipleship, 9/6/20, Southern Hills Baptist, Retrieved 6/21/21) Evil at its pinnacle....

CS Lewis once wrote... "The greatest evil is not done in back alleys and slums...rather...it is conceived and...moved, seconded, carried, and minuted...in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voices." [Charles Colson, \*Against the Night\*, p. 46. .](#)

That's where real evil occurs....Evil at its pinnacle is done at the top... not at the bottom ...of society... and the worse is when we refuse to acknowledge that... you and I complicit in that evil. And often it is that pride ...like Herod's...it's pride that is the greatest of sins... the devil's most effective and destructive tool.. and sometimes the worst evil has come from those of us who call themselves religious.. for we get caught in our own traps of self-righteous ... we only remember the Christian Crusades against Muslims and so many other religious wars... where we claim God is on our side... or in more modern times.... Battles like who is in and who is out in churches....who God loves and who God doesn't love???? (William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Westminster John Know, 2005)

And we forget we are not the judge of who God loves and does not love

. As Philip Dormer Stanhope, Fourth Earl of Chesterfield, wrote way back in the 1700s: “Vice, in its true light, is so deformed, that it shocks us at first sight; and would hardly ever seduce us, if it did not at first wear the mask of some virtue.”

That process by which we turn vice into virtue, in our minds, is called “rationalization.” Think about those rationalizations and how easy they are to deploy in the service of sin:

- “I’m not committing adultery; I’m just finding the love I need.”
- “I’m not living a greedy lifestyle of overconsumption; I’m just pursuing the American dream.”
- “I’m not acting unethically when I cheat my customers; I’m just following the laws of the marketplace.”
- “I’m not abusing my child; I’m just enforcing a little discipline.”

Temptation, we can resist. Temptation + rationalization = a very dangerous combination indeed!

—Carlos Wilton.

It's not always easy to recognize evil when it's happening in the here and now.

Once we assuage our conscience by calling something a "necessary evil," it begins to look more and more necessary and less and less evil.

—Sidney J. Harris.PAUSE

. We are called to fight evil, but we are also called to know how to fight it. Evil is not effectively resisted with hatred and with guns. Evil cannot be defeated with evil, negation with negation, terror with terror, missile with missile. The process of negation must be reversed. Only affirmation can overcome negation; evil can be integrated only by good; hatred can be laid to rest only by love. The only response to evil that has ever worked is the response of Jesus, and that is to lead a life of love. That means what it has always meant: visiting the sick, giving to the poor, helping those who need help."

--Jeffrey Burton Russell,

The Prince of Darkness

(Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 276.

There is an oft told story.....It seems that one evening an old Cherokee chief told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.

He said, “My son, the battle is between two wolves. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego.”

“The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked, “Grandfather, which wolf wins?”

The old Cherokee chief simply replied, “The one you feed.” Appears in: [Diamonds from Ashes](#)

Evil exists no doubt... even in the midst of our great works of love and caring...I think that's why the place of evil falls between the two stories of the disciples carrying out Jesus commands....Life is good ... scripture tells.... Full of good news... good deeds... like the disciples going out and healing the sick... and casting out demons.....but evil also exists..and as Christians we are summoned to

call out that evil... even that which exists within each one of us....because the central defect of evil is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it... it's not our tendencies... they are within us all....only when we acknowledge them can we move to being more fully children of God.

Our stories today are better understood when we look at the placement... smack dab in the middle of all the good works that the disciples are doing...being sent out by Jesus to cure the sick... do miracles of healing....and coming back together with Jesus to tell of their wonderful works....comes hideous evil. Can't explain... don't need to... just need to understand that evil does exist .....yet in spite of that evil...we know that God is still at work.... That is if.... we allow ourselves to be God's conduit... You and I ... we need to call out evil when we see it...we need to look at our national sins and wrong doings and repent of the evil that was done by us or our forefathers and mothers. Evil exists in the darkness but it melts under the light of exposure.

You and I ... we just need to keep on keeping on as best we can or as someone said... the light dawns and the penny drops...keep on doing the good and calling out the bad and the ugly