

Evil Works In Its Mysterious Ways

A sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

John 8:36

Halloween is coming soon. If you go to Germany, there is no trick-or-treating. If you go to France, there's no trick-or-treating. If you go to Italy, Russia, China, India, or Egypt, there's no trick-or-treating. Trick-or-treating is just something we Americans do. It has spread to Canada and is beginning to get a foothold in England and Hong Kong.

After Christmas, the Superbowl and Halloween are the most expensive holidays in our country. Why is Halloween so popular? It's fun. The costumes, candy, decorations. Yet there are other things that are fun, too. Other sports, theater, music, festivals of all kinds.

What is it about Halloween that makes it such a big event? It has to do with the fun of being a little wicked, to dress and act as a scoundrel, to flirt with danger and to play with death. There are haunted houses, ghosts in graveyards, and witches on broomsticks.

Along with that, there is the world of the paranormal: seances, tarot cards, and even UFOs. All of this raises the big question: Is evil real?

It comes down to the common point of view today that everything is neutral or there is no "real evil" that can't be fixed by more education and therapy. No defects which can't be repaired. If we talk about evil in any other way, we can be laughed off as a kook or fruitcake.

Eastern religions are growing in popularity today. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Baha' i are just a few found in most metropolitan areas today. These religions view evil very differently than the Judeo-Christian West. In Buddhism, for example, all distinctions are illusions, including distinctions between good and evil.

It's not just Eastern religions. There is the Christian Science movement, started by Mary Baker Eddy. For Christian Scientists Christianity is a "science." If you are ill, you ought to think your way back to health by reading her book, *Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures* (1910).

Over against all this kind of thinking, Martin Luther writes in the Small Catechism that the Lord "has purchased and freed us from all sins, from death, and from the

power of the devil.” (Creed, Second Article. Tappert 348; Kolb/Wengert 355). In the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 15:26, the great resurrection chapter, it says: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Death is the enemy. Death is not neutral. In 1 Cor 15:56: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.” The “sting” refers to the scorpion’s tail. “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14). Sin, death, and the power of the devil are all the same thing.

And what is that? Halloween helps to remind us that the devil is the great trickster. As Denis de Rougemont wrote in his book, *The Devil's Share* (1944): The devil has three tricks.

The first trick is to convince us that he doesn’t exist (This was already pointed out by Mallarme, the Nineteenth Century French poet.) because then he has free rein. There are many people who believe that real evil doesn’t exist. That raises a problem: If there is nothing evil, there’s nothing good. That raises the problem of justice. There’s no real justice or injustice because everything is neutral.

Failing in the first trick, the devil moves to his second trick, which is to make us think the devil is here in a particular person, such as Hitler. In this way we are tempted to focus evil on one person or event and ignore the devil working everywhere. Or we think of the devil as a caricature we can laugh off. In cartoons and Halloween costumes the devil is black figure with horns, a pitchfork, and a tail. We can laugh at such an oddity. Then we are less inclined to take evil seriously.

Failing that, the devil moves to his third trick. The illusionist and escape artist Harry Houdini died at the age of 56. The last part of his life he devoted to going to seances and exposing them as illusions, as fakery. The spiritualists hated him for it. Before he died in 1926, he made a deal with his wife that he would try to make contact with her every year on October 31st, Halloween. They had devised a certain formula. She tried for ten years and finally said: This is tiresome and pointless. She stopped. Houdini had once again exposed a fraud.

Where is evil? Denis de Rougemont writes: In the chair you are sitting in. Remember what Paul writes in 2 Cor 11:14: “Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” Satan is the great trickster, the great deceiver. We fall into the trap of thinking that other people are mixed up, easily fooled, but not us! Then the devil has got us. In 1 Cor 4:3-5 Paul writes that we cannot even judge ourselves; the Lord alone judges.

We think: I know. I can do right and avoid evil. When that happens, the evil one has tricked us again. He has no real power except to mislead us, deceive us. He does it again and again.

John 8:34 states: "I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." We think: Those other people are slaves, not I! We're caught.

The key to evil is in the cross alone. The cross tells us that the Lord alone saw what the problem was, and he solved it his way. The problem of evil was deadly serious. The Lord saw that the only answer was for the Lord himself to come and die. He did it his way, on the cross. This is beyond our understanding.

Is evil real? Is evil not real? Those questions are not the main thing. The main thing is: Evil is conquered. Most of us have heard the story of Luther, working late at night and throwing an inkwell at the devil. When you go to the Wartburg Castle, the guide will point out an ink-stained spot on the wall. This story, however, only surfaced a hundred years after Luther lived.

What is less well known is how Luther reacted to visions of Christ. One night he was "in fervent prayer when suddenly appeared on the wall a bright vision of our Savior Christ" looking down on him; it seemed as if Christ was really there. At first Luther thought it was a heavenly revelation, but then he concluded that it was produced by the devil and he spoke to the vision: "Go away, you confounded devil! I know no other Christ than he who was crucified and who is living now and comes to us in his Word and sacraments." Whereupon the apparition vanished, clearly showing from where it had come (WATR 1:287:8-27).

John 8:36 states: "If the Son has made you free; you will be free indeed." Luther writes in the great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress" (based on Psalm 146):

Though hordes of devils fill the land
All threatening to devour us,
we tremble not, unmoved we stand;
they cannot overpower us.
This world's prince may rage,
In fierce war engage.
He is doomed to fail;
God's judgment will prevail!
One little word shall fell him.

God has spoken and the earth shall melt away. Through the word of the cross, evil is conquered and we are free in Him. Amen