

## **Who is on the Lord's side?**

Mark 5:1-20

February 22, 2009

*Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King?  
Who will be his helpers other lives to bring?  
Who will leave the world's side? Who will face the foe?*

*Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe,  
But the King's own army, none can overthrow.*

*Who is on the Lord's side? Who for Him will go?*

Does singing that song make anybody else nervous?

I think of people who surely thought themselves on the Lord's side, people who surely thought themselves soldiers in the King's army, sallying forth in God's name to do battle against evil ... people who readily took other people's lives, for the Lord's sake!

I think of the men, French and German and English and Norwegian and Portugese -- crusaders -- who, in God's name, did battle against evil by waging holy war against Muslims, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Muslims and Jews and Christians.

I think of those who less than five hundred years ago did battle against evil by tying religious dissidents and suspected witches to a stake and burning them alive.

I think of our own congregational ancestors in Salem, Massachusetts, who did battle against evil by trying and executing twenty men and women for witchcraft.

I think of the many Christians who quoted the Bible to justify slavery, or, on the other hand, of John Brown, who in his opposition to the evil of slavery, justified armed insurrection and murder.

I think of the man who said this:

*My Christian feeling tells me that my lord and savior is a warrior. It calls my attention to the man who, lonely and surrounded by only a few supporters, recognized what they were, and called for a battle against them, and who, by God, was not the greatest sufferer, but the greatest warrior ... As a human being it is my duty to see to it that humanity will not suffer the same catastrophic collapse as did that old civilization two thousand years ago, a civilization which was driven to its ruin by the Jews ... I am convinced that I am really a devil and not a Christian if I do not feel compassion and do not wage war, as Christ did two thousand years ago, against those who are ... exploiting these poverty-stricken people.*

Do you know who it was who said that? It was Adolph Hitler.

And I think of those Christians among us who just as eagerly take up arms against Muslim infidels (or cheer on those who do), as some Muslims eagerly take up arms (or cheer on those who do) against Christian infidels.

*You call us into your church,  
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be your servants in the service of others,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil ...*

Would it be better, would you be more comfortable, if we just left out that last phrase?

And yet, there is another side to this coin ...

Can you tell me that you can look out at this world as it is, not just your own backyard, but this wide world in which we live, and not see evil? Can you tell me that you can look even into your own backyard, or even into your own soul, and not see the marks of evil there too?

When governmental policy and war and indifference mean that some children starve while others have more than enough -- in Sudan or Haiti or Romania or even in our own country -- is that merely unfortunate? Or is it evil?

When a child is sexually abused is that just a shame, the result of bad choices or a bad conscience or bad upbringing, or is it evil?

Perhaps you saw the story about the two thousand children incarcerated by two Pennsylvania judges in return for kickbacks from the owners of the private prison facilities that would house them. Is it enough to call this a case of bad judgment or overzealous greed? Or is it evil?

When teens tease and mock and ridicule and ostracize a kid who doesn't quite fit in or at least doesn't quite fit their idea of fitting in, is that just kids being kids? Or is it evil?

When you curse somebody out or spread gossip or lies or say what comes to your mind without thinking just to cause hurt, is that just losing your cool? Or is it evil?

When a class of human beings is singled out for discrimination and abuse -- because of race, because of religion, because of gender, because of sexual preference, because of economic status -- is that merely a social problem? Or is it evil?

When wars -- just or unjust, fought for whatever reason, good or otherwise -- claim tens and hundreds and thousands of thousands of innocent lives and wreak havoc on economies and environments and social institutions, is that merely the price to be paid for survival and security and freedom? Or is it, in some way, the fallout of the pervasive evil among us and even in us?

The idea of resisting evil is complicated, isn't it? So what are we to do? We know there is real evil in this world and we want to take the Lord's side in standing against it, but how do we heed God's call to resist the powers of evil without becoming part of the problem ourselves?

We pray! We pray humbly for wisdom and for mercy. And we listen. We listen very carefully!

*You call us into your church, to resist the powers of evil ...*

What are we called into God's church to do? (To resist evil.) What are we NOT called to do? (Resist evil people.) We are called to resist the powers of evil, not to resist evil people.

In every case, the disturbing and violent acts mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, acts carried out by men and women purportedly against evil in the name of the Lord, targeted people. In every case, in the minds of these soldiers of God, evil became personified in a person or group of persons.

Here's an analogy. Suppose you are a physician who wants to eliminate an infectious disease. Couldn't you easily accomplish your aim by eliminating everyone who has the disease? But, then, of course, you also would have lost all your patients! And what would you have accomplished?

Evil is like a disease, infecting human spirits and bodies, destroying human spirits and bodies, disrupting the beauty and goodness of life as God intends it. And Jesus came, in the name of the Lord, not to seek out and eliminate all those contaminated by evil, but to heal people of its effects in all its forms.

Think of that man living in the burial caves in Gerasa. What did everybody else try to do with him? They tried to bind him, with irons and chains, but Jesus intends to set him free! Jesus addressed his problem, rather than seeing him as the problem. Evil, in whatever form and by whatever means, was destroying him, robbing him of his humanity ... and Jesus set him free!

Can we say the same of evil and its effects in our world and in our time? Can we say that it is not people that are the problem, but the evil that ensnares and enslaves them? Can we say that, even of our enemies, and if we can, isn't that at least a partial fulfillment of Jesus' command to love our enemies, if we see our enemies not as the cause, but the effect of evil, if our desire is not to destroy them but to free them from evil just as we want too to be freed from evil? Isn't it a sign of the mercy and love of God in us when we recognize the common humanity we share with all people and the common enemy we share -- namely, the powers of evil among us all?

*You call us into your church, to resist the powers of evil ...*

We are called to resist what? (The powers of evil.) Not the power of evil, but the powers. It's plural!

Jesus asked the man who came out of the caves his name, and he replied: "My name is 'Mob' -- there are so many of us!" And so it is with us. We are beset by evil powers in many shapes and forms and sizes. Evil is not one single power, one unified force, before which we surely must tremble in fear!

It is true, the Bible and even Jesus talks about Satan -- destroyer, liar, deceiver, enemy -- but really Satan is a rather minor and insignificant and little mentioned figure in the biblical story. By no means is Satan spoken of as the only source of evil, and by no means is Satan seen as an estimable threat to the will of God. God's will will be done. God's kingdom will come. The future is not up for grabs. Our hope does not hang in the balance. It is certain!

Evil is real, but it comes at us in many ways and takes many forms: pride and envy and greed, prejudice and bitterness and jealousy, corruption and oppression and abuse, apathy and self-indulgence and vengeance, divisive and oppressive powers that pervade our human spirits, divisive and oppressive powers that pervade our human institutions. People may be beset by evil, but so may corporations and governments and judicial systems and economies. And it is evil in all these forms, in all its many different forms, that we are called to resist.

*You call us into your church,  
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be your servants in the service of others,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil ...*

What is different about this last line? What word is absent in this last line that is present in the three previous lines? ("To.") That's because this line is connected to the previous line, part of a single call: *to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil*. These are two sides of one coin, two vital elements in one single redemptive process. Proclaiming good news and resisting evil go together!

Resisting evil is good news, because it is a means by which men and women are set free, set free from oppression and poverty and hatred and self-hatred and strife and isolation and fear. We proclaim good news by resisting evil, and we resist evil by proclaiming good news. The good news, the gospel, offers people a way out of evil, a way of overcoming evil and its effects, a power that can and will set them free. When Jesus met that man on the other side of Lake Galilee and set him free from the evil spirits that tormented him, was he resisting evil or proclaiming the gospel?

We cannot proclaim the gospel without resisting evil. It's like the two great commandments: *Love the Lord God with all your heart and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself*. They go together. They must go together. If you say you love God, but do not love your neighbor, you prove yourself a liar. In the same way, if you proclaim good news, but stand by idly in the face

of injustice or poverty or discrimination or cruelty or dishonesty, your words are empty and worthless and powerless.

The opposite of resistance is indifference, apathy, tolerance. That's what they all did with that man living among the tombs. As long as he was out there in the caves, away from town, out of sight, out of mind, as long as he didn't bother them, who cares?

Who cares? Jesus did, because Jesus came to bring good news, the good news of peace, to all humanity, and Jesus understood that means resisting evil when it shows its face.

But, let's be fair. What could they have done for that man, even if they wanted to? They lacked the capacity, they didn't have the power, to heal him, to set him free. Didn't they?

Regardless, you do! You have the capacity, you have the power, by your words and by your deeds, to heal men and women of the effects of evil. You, the members of Christ's church, you, the members of Christ's body, are Christ's heart and hands and feet. You carry in your bodies his message and his spirit. You are called to do what he did: to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil.

I am glad to say that I am on the Lord's side. I am glad to say that I will do my best to serve my Lord, facing the foe, but doing it Jesus' way, standing firmly against the powers of evil, and standing firmly on the side of people, all people.

When we say we are on the Lord's side, surely we must follow the Lord's way!