
EVEN THE DEVIL GOES TO CHURCH

JESUS and the devil were standing on opposite sides of a fence.

- A group of people approached and each person moved to one side of the fence or the other,
 - except for one man who simply climbed up and sat on the fence.
- After a time, JESUS led HIS group away and the devil did the same, while the man remained on the fence.
- It wasn't too long before the devil returned, clearly looking for something.
 - "Have you lost something?" the man on the fence asked.
 - The devil looked up and exclaimed, "You!"
 - "No," the man said. "I didn't choose either you or JESUS. I chose to be up here."
 - "That's okay," said the devil. "I own the fence."

Do you believe there is a devil?

In today's gospel, JESUS clearly states that the devil is real.

- Elsewhere in the Bible he is referred to as Lucifer, a fallen angel, or as Satan.
 - The Bible tells us that Lucifer was an angel who desired to be like GOD—equal to GOD—even though he was a creation of GOD like all the other angels.

GOD has worshipers, but Satan wants worshipers.

- Toward that end, Satan tries to build barriers between us and GOD so that we end up on the devil's side of the fence,
 - or at least on the fence.
 - The devil is very active out there where there are many tools at his disposal to move us, or turn us, or seduce us away from GOD.
 - But the devil is also active right here, in our church community.

That's right. We need to be aware that even the devil goes to church.

In the parable of the weeds, tares are sown among the wheat in a field.

- The tares are specifically darnel, a weed that when it is young looks just like young wheat plants,
 - but later it can be distinguished from the wheat.
- JESUS tells us that the sower is the SON OF MAN, or JESUS HIMSELF.
- The field is the world.
- The good seed—the wheat—are the sons and daughters of the Kingdom of GOD>>>in other words, believers, us.
- The weeds are the sons and daughters of the evil one>>>nonbelievers.
- The enemy who sows the weeds is the devil.

JESUS also tells us what will happen to those who follow the evil one, or at least who reject the sower, the SON OF MAN.

- They will be burned, or sent to eternal fire.
 - Those who don't believe will perish.
 - And that gives two very important things for us to do.
 - First, we must make sure we do not lose our faith.
 - Second, we must do all that we can to help others find their faith.

So let me talk a bit about how the devil works.

- How does the devil sow weeds among the wheat?

First, the devil places unbelievers in the midst of believers to tempt them away from GOD.

- I've mentioned before that while serving my first church, I was introduced by members to a woman named Cathy.
- Cathy had been in a satanic cult for six years, but had recently gotten out of it.
 - Cathy told me how, at a time of struggle, members of that satanic cult befriended her.
 - They supported and encouraged her while drawing her into the cult.
 - Before she even realized it, she had turned to the worship of Satan.

This is an extreme example of how the devil works.

- Sow unbelievers among us,
- have them challenge our faith and our beliefs,
- use them to tempt us to behaviors and priorities that are different than those of our CREATOR.

I'm not suggesting we need to be suspicious of our fellow worshipers,

- but we need recognize that the devil will try to infiltrate in various ways.
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Second, a key tool that the devil uses against us is guilt.

- Guilt is often fostered by others who remind us of the ways that we've failed GOD, family, friends, Christian sisters and brothers, and even ourselves>>>and these reminders too often are delivered even by other Christians.
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Ruth was a restaurant server I met while visiting another city.

- Each time she came to serve me we talked about life in general, and about her life specifically.
 - Ruth told me how she had been an active church-goer until she became pregnant without being married.
 - Her church didn't approve of unwed mothers and let her know, so she left because of the guilt these Christians laid upon her.
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A third strategy used by the devil is to sow the seeds of dissension.

- Even in the church the devil does this:
 - when people criticize ministries instead of trying to make them better;
 - when individuals try to achieve positions of power and prestige, instead of humbly trying to put the LORD first;
 - when people make surface judgments of others instead of taking time to get to know one another and treating each other as they would want to be treated.
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In his book, *Messy Spirituality*, Mike Yaconelli describes how the devil can sow weeds even inside the church: *We stumble into a party we weren't invited to and find the uninvited standing at the door making sure no other uninvited get in.*

So how do we fight the devil? How do we stop his attacks?

- The answer is simple: by putting up a hedge. (You're looking at me funny.)

Job 1:10, Satan laments that he can't attack Job because of GOD'S protection: *"Haven't YOU put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?"*

- Now I don't know what it is about landscaping that blocks the devil, but there are things we can do put up some greenery:
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First, be positive.

- Praise others, rather than try to pull them down.
- Get involved in what is happening.
- Minister to others, rather than just letting it be done for you.
- Build others up.

My favorite word in the Bible is edify, which means to build up.

- We defeat the devil when we engage in the act of encouraging and praising that build each other up.

Second, present a different church.

- There are so many churches whose message seems to be one of judgement and rules.
 - We need to cut down the devil's weeds by presenting our church as bathed in the love of CHRIST.
 - That love of CHRIST was offered to all people—even ones who have been in satanic cults, or had a child without being married, or who don't look like us or act like us, or anything else that the world may judge as bad or sinful.

We need let others know that this is a church of unconditional love and acceptance.

Third, we need to be prepared to go to the dark places.

- We need to be wheat among the devil's weeds.

That couple from that first church I served befriended Cathy and told her about the love of JESUS.

- Cathy renounced the devil and was baptized.
 - Because that couple was willing to sow wheat among the weeds, the devil lost another soul.

GOD never, ever sends evil upon us.

GOD never, ever wants us to suffer or doubt.

- Rather, as Paul tells us, GOD works for the good in all things for those who love GOD.
 - And the best example of that is the cross itself.
 - The cross offers the supreme testimony that evil happens and yet is not strong enough to defeat GOD'S love,
 - that GOD is committed to staying with us though even the most difficult of circumstances,
 - and that GOD can and will work through us to defeat the devil.

When our daughter, Talitha, was young she became upset because I was spraying the dandelions in our garden.

- "Daddy," she said, "I like to pick the dandelion flowers."
 - I explained to her that the dandelions were a threat to the other plants in the garden that gives us food.
 - "You see," I said, "it's not so much that I'm against the dandelions. It's just that I am for our garden."

That's GOD'S attitude toward the weeds.

- GOD is for the gardens of our lives.
 - And GOD invites us to rid our gardens of the weeds and sow the seeds that will bring others closer to CHRIST.
 - GOD wants us to be watchful for the things that can undermine our faith or our relationships with each other.
 - GOD want us to build each other up and then invite others to come and grow in the field—in the garden—that is our church.
 - This is the very best way that we can defeat the devil even in our midst.