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Lent 3
March 4, 2018
Luke 11:14-28
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now [Jesus] was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled.

Brother Erber shared with me a little survey he does in Africa whenever he goes to a new place. He asks them, “What’s more real: the body or the spirit?” Without exception, the people in West Africa answer, “The spirit.” The material, physical world is less substantive and real for them than the spiritual and supernatural. I don’t know about you, but I have a really difficult time understanding that mentality. Maybe they’ve gone too far. But even if the West Africans have gone too far (or they may be right—who knows?), we as Christians need to believe that devils and demons and their ability to impact us and our world are very, very real. If they weren’t, Jesus wouldn’t be performing exorcisms. He’d just tell them that it’s a medical condition or something. Anything less would be a lie; and Jesus isn’t a liar. Jesus is the Truth.

But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons,” while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven.

The Pharisees attack Jesus of being in league with Satan. They slander Jesus by saying He’s working with the devil. And they invoke the chief demon’s name, Beelzebul, the Lord of the Flies, the prince of darkness and ruler of demons. To say something’s name was to have power over it. By invoking Beelzebul’s name, maybe they hoped to drive Jesus away.

Some other unbelievers wanted a sign from heaven, that is, a sign to prove He came from God and not from the devil. Yet, if they refuse to listen to Him, how can Jesus prove that He’s from the Father? After this specific exorcism, Jesus tells them what the sign will be: the sign of Jonah. “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt 12:40).

Before He gets to that, Jesus refutes their unbelief with a little logic.

But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.”

Some of the Pharisees' sons or students were also casting out demons. We're given the idea that the demonic activity was particularly active in Jesus' day. It isn't nearly so much today. Actually, in the previous chapter, when the 72 disciples Jesus sent out return, He declares, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Lk 10:18). Theologians much wiser than I have said that that was when Jesus limited the devil's power and cast him out of heaven, as it says in Revelation 12 (vv8-9). But during Jesus' earthly ministry, especially before He sent out the 72 disciples, the demons were particularly oppressive. When you consider that they know who Jesus is, it kind of makes sense, doesn't it?

Jesus' first argument is that Satan isn't stupid. With his craftiness, he tricked Adam and Eve. To work against himself, though, would be utter foolishness. The devil wouldn't divide his household, because it would mean his ruin.

Jesus then makes His second argument: "your sons" have been casting out demons. "Are you going to attack them? Are you going to falsely claim that your own sons are in league with the devil? I'm doing the same thing. So are you going to teach falsely against them in order to condemn Me? No, they will condemn you because you won't listen to the truth that I am from God."

Jesus is patient and long-suffering. He takes the verbal assaults from the Pharisees. He does it so some might hear him. And some do, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. More, though, He puts up with it because of those who will overhear the fight—and, this morning, that includes you. Jesus verbally spars with His opponents because the rest in the crowd are worth it. Jesus fights because, in His estimation, you're worth fighting for.

After refuting His dissenters, Jesus points out for us the only logical explanation and its implications with His third argument.

But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

"The finger of God" is the Holy Spirit, at least, that's what Matthew's parallel account says: "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons" (Mt 12:28). This is the very Spirit that performed the plagues in Egypt. It's the same Spirit that came upon you in your Holy Baptism, making you children of light who hear God's Word and lead holy lives according to it. It is the same Spirit that spoke through the prophets and apostles.

Jesus is in league not with evil spirits but with the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit has great power. Just the flick of a finger really is all that's needed to cast out demons or to produce gnats. Jesus uses no more than a Word, and every Word of His is filled with the Spirit. As Luther puts it in "A Mighty Fortress," "One little word can fell him."

Therefore, the Pharisees and you ought to see that Jesus' defeat of demons and devils is a clear sign that God's kingdom has already come into the world. Welcome this rule and open your hearts to its grace. Joyfully receive His Word and believe it is true. Only devilish minds could deny what is so evident, attempting to oppose God's gracious rule.

To cinch His point, Jesus uses a parable as His fourth argument.

When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Because of his strength—and he is indeed powerful—the devil must first be bound before anyone can plunder his palace. And what is the devil's palace? It's your heart. It's in the heart that the devil exerts his great influence. First, he whispers doubt in God's Word, both in its truthfulness and in our relationship to it. He has convinced much of the world that the Holy Scriptures are a lie, a poorly written mythology, a tool to oppress one's neighbor. But he doesn't stop there. No, the devil has an even craftier trick for you. He exploits your belief in its truthfulness, and attempts to convince you that you are above Scripture. He says, "You've learned so very much. You know what's right and wrong, good and evil. You even know that men wrote the Bible. And those men weren't perfect. They were sinners, too. They also were a product of their time and culture, which was pretty messed up in its own ways. It only makes sense that some of their ideas got mixed with God's Word, right? Thankfully, you've learned enough and even have the Holy Spirit so you can read Scripture and sift out man's word from God's." And so some who claim to be Christian say things like "The Bible contains God's Word" and "I believe in the Incarnate Scriptures" and even "I'm glad we now know more than Paul did."

Do you, at times, hold these same thoughts in your heart? Do you live as if you do? Although the devil was cast out of your heart in the holy water of Baptism—after all, you spoke the renunciation of the devil and all his works and all his ways—and you received the Holy Spirit in the saving flood, you can fall back under the devil's power.

“When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.”

As St. Paul addressed in the Epistle lesson, you were called out of the devil’s kingdom and his destructive ways. So it is a grave mistake to imagine that you can receive the Gospel, come to Jesus, and yet return to your sins.

Instead, rejoice to hear that Jesus has overcome the devil and your sins—that Jesus has opened God’s kingdom to you who hear His Word and follow Him. Jesus overcame the devil when He was tempted in the wilderness. Again and again Jesus cast out demons with but a Word, a flick of His finger. Jesus even suffered one of His own apostles being led by the devil to betray Him. Most assuredly, the devil struck Jesus a blow at the crucifixion. But Jesus struck an even greater blow, as it had been prophesied against the devil: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gn 3:16). Jesus did all this for you and for your rescue from the devil and from your sin.

Again, God spoke this curse to the devil so our first parents would overhear it and pass on the promise to you. The crucifixion is the devil’s bruising of Christ’s heel; the resurrection is Jesus’ bruising of the devil’s head. One is awful to be sure. The other, however, is much worse. Jesus has bruised, struck, or crushed the devil’s head! It is a mortal blow, from which the devil can never recover. While he whimpers and rages, holding on as long as he can, the devil has been defeated and victory over him is assured. Jesus lives, and your victory is won! The devil’s palace has been plundered, and to you is given the kingdom!

Therefore, rejoice!

As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”

Jesus doesn’t deny that His mother was blessed. Didn’t cousin Elizabeth say “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Lk1:42)? But it would be misleading not to say much more. Indeed, yet rather Jesus says that vastly higher is the beatitude that rests on the true spiritual connection with Jesus. It’s a connection of such

importance that even the motherhood of Jesus would have been of no value: “Blessed are they who hear God’s Word and keep it, guard it, cling to it.”

Pastor Stinnett, a missionary in Ethiopia, told me the most surprising thing he learned about the people there: one, they all agree there is a god; two, they all think we have a relationship with that god; and three, they’re all sure that the relationship matters. Would you say that about our culture? Do the people you know all agree with that?

There is a God. His name is Jesus. He’s the God who created all things. He casts out demons and rescued you from the devil. He died and rose again so that you might live.

You are His sister, His brother, because you and Jesus have the same Father. You have received the Holy Spirit.

It matters. It matters more than anything else in all the world. It matters because it determines whether you spend eternity with the devil in death or you spend eternity with God in life. And Jesus says to you, I am going before you so that where I am you may be also.

In His name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.