



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The 18th Sunday after Trinity, October 19th. 2014

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost ✠

There's something decidedly weird about the theme of the prayer appointed for today: The Collect of the Day is the technical name for it. The prayer begs God to help us withstand the temptations of "the world, the flesh and the devil." To many folk this not just antique, it's positively medieval.

Can the Church, in this day and age, seriously mean that the world we love, cherish and protect is fundamentally evil. Does it really mean to imply that our flesh – our humanity – is somehow tainted? Is the Church seriously asking us to believe that our natural inclinations will inevitably lead us astray?

After all, we are all "good people." We know that nature and "natural" things – the world's "ecosystem," for example" -- are intrinsically good. Is the Church calling into question the spirit of progress that inspires free societies such as our own? Is it questioning the underlying assumption that animates social discourse – that each successive generation is wiser and more enlightened than the one that preceded it?

The most jarring thing about this prayer, however, is the way it brings the devil into the business. It talks about him as though he is a major player in the affairs of the world. It talks about him as though he is some sort of influence peddler who is constantly trying to coax us into doing things we shouldn't be doing.

This is the sort of talk we'd expect of snake handling fundamentalists or wild-eyed ayatollahs calling down the wrath of Allah on the Great Satan "America." If the idea that the world and the flesh

are evil sounds medieval, then the notion that the devil is a real person harks back to the dark ages. We are more sophisticated than that today. The world isn't perfect, but most folks would agree that with good will and conscientious effort, it could be improved; immeasurably improved, in fact.

We don't consider flesh evil anymore. We know that with careful exercise and a healthy diet the old "bod" can do very nicely well into our sunset years. We know that doing what comes naturally is healthy, and repressing what the Bible quaintly calls "the lusts of the flesh" or the "fleshy appetites" can actually do you harm.

(Actually this isn't quite as good as it sounds: Bacon cheeseburgers, fries and huge chocolate milk shakes are, for some reason, considered unnatural. Alfalfa spouts, on the other hand, are not. Go figure)

We know that manifestations of what used to be called "possession by the devil" are simply symptoms of mental health problems – neuroses and psychoses which cause people to act out – that, in many instances, can be put right with the correct application of modern psychiatric medicine.

The other side of the coin is that we see Satan as a metaphor, not a person – a sort of amorphous atmosphere of evil that flows through the universe: the "Dark Side of the Force," so to speak. Actually, there are many folks who deny even that. They contend that Satan merely symbolizes, anthropomorphically, the bad side of human nature. Indeed, Satan is considered so unimportant and irrelevant he doesn't rate a mention in "concordance" section of many modern Bibles.

There are, however, serious drawbacks to such notions. While we might have a problem accepting what might be best described as the personhood of Satan or the Devil, Jesus clearly didn't. Indeed, whenever Jesus mentions Satan and his servants (and he does so often) he speaks about them as real individuals, real persons. He even says he witnessed "Satan as lightning fall from Heaven."

And this shouldn't be altogether surprising: The Bible teaches us, quite unequivocally, that we live in a fallen and sinful world, that, by our very nature, we are inclined to sin and that because of this we cannot trust our fundamental impulses and instincts.

The Bible also teaches us that the devil has genuine personhood; that he isn't some vague, amorphous force; that he isn't the nasty side of our natures; but, rather, that he is a person – a spiritual one rather than a physical one, to be sure, but a person nevertheless.

For example, when Jesus battled Satan, after forty days and forty nights fasting in the Wilderness, he wasn't wrestling with the unpleasant side of his own character or some indefinable evil force. Aside from the fact that Jesus is perfect and has no nasty side to his nature, the Gospels make it clear he was engaged in a true battle of wills with a genuine personal entity.

This confronts us with a choice of looking either worldly wise or simple minded. Our natural instinct, of course, is to go with conventional worldly wisdom. Surely if so many bright people think he doesn't exist, they can't all be wrong! But if, on the other hand, Jesus and the Bible are right then we will not merely have put our selves in danger, we will have put our very mortal souls in jeopardy.

If the devil is nothing more than an evil, but undirected, force, he is far less to be feared than if he is a thinking, analytical person. It is possible, for instance, to contemplate evading or out-witting an undirected force of evil.

By contrast, even a short tussle with the personification of evil is an entirely different kettle of fish. It is a contest that even the brightest and best of us would dread. Thus, we have got to decide whether to place our faith in a modern

theory, which experience tells us, might well turn out to be simply an intellectual fad, or stick with a concept that has been around the place for more than 2,000 years.

If Jesus is to be believed, this is a very important decision. According to Jesus, Satan's goal is our personal, individual destruction. And all he needs to achieve this goal is find a way that appeals to our own individual natures that distracts us from God – that sets our minds on other things.

He doesn't need to strike a deal to buy our souls. He doesn't need to bribe us like Dr. Faustus to worship him. (In the story, he offered Helen of Troy.) All that the devil actually needs to do is slightly alter our focus: to tempt us into looking in a slightly different direction.

He's got a thousand ways of doing this. Sure he can play to our weaknesses, but he much more effectively plays to our strengths – tempting us to take pride in what we perceive as our virtues and to look down on the shortcomings of others. He can exploit our eagerness to be good Christians by tempting us to immerse our selves in studying the faith, rather than practicing it.

Certainly, it is not intrinsically sinful to picture nature as naturally good and to act as though the appetites of the flesh are invariably healthy. But folks who do so are people at risk, because we will be putting our faith in a lie.

If we believe the world is intrinsically perfect, we'll be tempted to worship it rather than its creator. If we believe appetites of the flesh are natural and healthy, we will be tempted to keep our own counsel instead of trying discover God's will. In other words, we might even be tempted into the heresy that St. Paul describes as "sinning that grace may abound."

Failing to recognize the devil, Satan, as the personification of evil carries with it an even graver risk. It is the risk that we won't recognize him when he comes around. And if we don't recognize him for what he is, chances are we'll do nothing to fight him. And if we do nothing . . . well, remember, all that it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. *AMEN.*