

IMPORTANT INFORMATION: The stories, and other elements of this sermon, contain copyrighted materials. We purchase them and have permission to use them in our parish, but not outside of it. Please do not post this sermon, or the stories in it, on any social media site. That would violate our agreement and subject us to a fine

Easter 2 - April 24, 2022

“The Devil’s I”

Read: Acts 5: 29 - 32/ Memorize: Acts 5: 29

In a world of Good Friday nightmares, it is time for some Easter dreams. Martin Luther claimed that whenever and wherever God built a church, the devil always builds a chapel. As we’ve worked to build a world where human rights and dignity are respected, the devil has been working overtime, constructing his perpendicular chapel.

Unfortunately, it’s a chapel that has grown so large and so tall that it has been able to take its choir on the road, a choir that happily sings the devil’s siren song. This is the tune the devil loves to hear: The discordant sound of a million voices, all singing their own song, no harmony, no melody, no chorus. Only a din of solos.

This “devil’s song” has only one rule of composition: the first person singular is all that there is. That’s why it is called the “devil’s I.” There is no first person plural “we” in the devil’s chorus, no third person singular, “she or he” to be concerned with, no third person plural “they” to be considered. Everything and everyone is intently focused on “I,” to the exclusion of all else.

Ulysses S. Grant once admitted, “I only know two tunes. One is Yankee Doodle; the other isn’t.” Increasingly, in the world we live in, and within our own country, we only know two tunes. One is “the devil’s I;” the other isn’t.

It goes without saying that to all those busily belting out this self-love love song of this “devil’s I” there is no God. Rather, perhaps it is not so much that there is no God, as there is nothing higher than oneself. Nothing but one’s self. The Earl of Gurney, in Peter Barnes’ play, “The Ruling Class,” when asked how he knew he was God, replied, “Simple. When I pray to Him, I find I am talking to myself.”

The existence of some higher authority, outside the self is seen to be meaningless, because the world of self is wholly self-contained. No one else enters it, no one

else leaves it. “Others” are perceived as bothersome, burdensome, or in-the-way baggage.

In that sense, Peter’s words to the Sanhedrin can make us both pleased and nervous. We like hearing that the religious authorities aren’t capable of quieting down the apostle’s will to witness. Of course, there is a long history in society of enjoying thumbing one’s nose at those in authority.

But the reason Peter gives for disobeying the Sanhedrin’s “strict orders” gives us all an “I” pause: “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” Peter claimed no self-motivation, no personal agenda. He and the apostles are not working outside the bounds of authority. They were working for the one absolute authority, God.

In that sense, they are laying hold of the whole biblical witness in this area: we are not our own. God is God and we are not. God is the absolute of all absolutes. The absolute that relativizes all other absolutes.

If we believe that, then there is a threefold mandate to those who recognize God’s authority over human life, who refuse to worship at the shrine of the first person perpendicular, which is repeated throughout the scriptures.

1. Please God above all. While they were slaves in Egypt the Hebrew midwives disobeyed Pharaoh’s order to destroy all the newborn male children. They did this to please God. David danced his way into Jerusalem to please God, despite his wife’s disapproval and condemnation. Solomon built an incredible monument in order to please God.

To please God means to seize the moment and to put one’s present at risk.

2. Serve God above all. Serving God takes more than faith. It takes sweat, patience, strength and spirit. Moses served God and had to spend his final years wandering the wilderness with, arguably, the most unruly, headstrong people the world had ever known. Jeremiah served God and found himself hated, ridiculed and feared by his fellow countrymen. Mary served God and faced an uncertain future with her husband and family because of her unlikely pregnancy.

To serve God means to sacrifice the moment and to put one’s future at risk.

3. Obey God above all. It was in obedience to God that Abram picked up and went in search of a land of his own, when he was already an old man. It was in obedience to God that Hosea the prophet married Gomer, a woman no man would have willingly chosen as his wife. It was in obedience to God that such ordinary men as the apostles stood before the powerful Sanhedrin and defied their authority. It was to please God that Jesus allowed himself to be put on a cross and crucified.

To obey God rather than adhere to human rules and regulations powers the faith. All our weaknesses are transformed into strengths when they are used for God's sake.

To obey God means to surrender the moment and to put one's past at risk.

When we are pleasing God, serving God and obeying God, we suddenly discover a tremendous freedom. The accompaniment the devil plays along with his siren's song of "I," but tries to keep so soft in the background that we don't really notice it, is one of fear. With no one other than yourself as a reference point, there is also no one other than yourself to rely on. Fear that somehow "I" won't be able to "do it all, have it all" or "be it all" makes the "me only" solo a frighteningly lonely tune.

When we surrender the authority of our lives to God, when we admit that God is God and we are not, we open ourselves up to a tidal wave of divine compassion and love. Recognizing that God is the absolute of all absolutes relativizes all other absolutes. **Pleasing God, serving God and obeying God becomes an expression of God's strength, Christ's love and the witness of the Holy Spirit in our lives.**

Then, just as Peter and the apostles did, we can stand before all those other authorities that command our obedience and say with Peter the words he spoke almost 2,000 years ago to the Sanhedrin:

"We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead after you killed him by hanging him on a cross. Then God put him in the place of honor at his right hand as Prince and Savior. He did this so the people of Israel would repent of their sins and be forgiven.³² We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, who is given by God to those who obey him." It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit

that we can make the claim to serve God, giving obedience to His absolute authority over all things, now and forever.

Here's your question: How will you please, serve and obey God above all?