

Grace and peace to you . . .

It is the way of the wicked to call what is good evil. You see it in society, where those who stand up for what is moral and right are called extremist, closed-minded, or haters. You see it in the church, where those who hold firmly to the truth of God's Word are called unloving and legalistic. The wicked portray themselves as good and noble and caring, while what is truly good and noble and compassionate is portrayed as something to avoid.

The wicked call what is good evil in today's Gospel. Jesus is doing something good. He is casting out a demon from a man who had been made unable to speak by it, freeing him from this dark power. When the demon had gone out, the man was able to talk again. The multitudes marveled at the wonderful thing that Jesus had done.

But there were some who hated Jesus, who couldn't stand or accept His goodness. So they called good evil. They said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons." They were saying, "Jesus gets His power from Satan." They tried to raise suspicions about Jesus in the multitudes that saw what He did.

Those who accused Jesus of being of the devil showed themselves to be of the devil. For it is the way of the devil to plant doubt and work against faith in Jesus. Others showed that they were in league with

Satan by testing Jesus, asking for a sign from heaven. That is exactly what the devil did in the wilderness when he told Jesus to throw Himself down from the temple and let the angels catch Him. They already had a sign from Jesus in the casting out of the demon. But unbelief always wants something more than Jesus and what He gives.

In the verse following this lesson, Jesus said to this same multitude, "This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign." This generation wants to walk by sight and not by faith, trusting experiences and emotions more than Christ and His Word. Jesus said that the only sign that would be given them is the sign of Jonah, the sign of a man buried three days in the belly of death but who rose from the depths to new life. The sign to which faith clings, then, is the sign of the cross, Christ crucified and risen to save sinners.

This sign of the cross has been given to you in holy Baptism, placed onto your very body by water and the Word. At the font Jesus repeated the miracle of today's Gospel in you, "Depart thou unclean spirit; and make room for the Holy Spirit." Like the mute, you were conceived and born with an evil spirit. You were by nature in the possession and the dominion of the devil. St. Paul said, "You were once darkness . . ." However, Jesus has enlightened your darkness and washed away your sins and rescued you from the devil's dominion, bringing you into His own realm of light and mercy and grace. St. Paul goes on to say, "But now you are light in the Lord." You have been released from the devil's

grip. You have been conveyed into the kingdom of God's beloved Son and given His Holy Spirit. Now your mute tongue is loosed to sing the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Truly, Jesus has done marvelous things for you.

Just as in the Gospel, there are people today who call good evil. They label Baptism and the preaching of Christ and His Supper as useless ceremony. They attack God's Word by calling it a man-made creation. They criticize Christians as being foolish and weak and offensive. When you face such assaults of the devil, remember that it is written, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty." [1Cor. 1:27] In a world that wants signs from heaven, you know that Jesus is your sign from heaven. He is all that you need. For again it is written, "We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." [1Cor. 1:23-24]

Jesus is the Stronger Man who overcomes the strong man, the devil. But your Lord shows His strength not with spectacular power or with an all-out display of force. Jesus overcomes the devil's trickery with a trickery of His own. Satan entered this world and gained the heart of man in disguise. He overcame man through cunning and trickery and deception. The devil disguised himself as good. To overcome the devil

and rescue man, Christ ensnared the devil with divine cunning and trickery and deception: not evil disguised as good, but good disguised as evil. Jesus allowed Himself to be hung on a cross, bloodied and beaten. He perished as if He were an evil criminal. The devil took the bait and swallowed Him whole. But in this way Jesus invaded the enemy's domain of death and attacked from the inside out. From behind enemy lines He demolished all of the devil's armor in which he trusted. Christ infiltrated the devil's kingdom and conquered him by means of the very death which the devil brought into the world. He turned the devil's weapons right back in his own face and destroyed him. By this divine trickery, you have been released and set free.

By a tree the devil overcame mankind; by the tree of the cross the devil is overcome. By death Satan sought to steal away man's glory; by the death of Christ the glory of man is restored. Satan is caught in his own trap, bound and defeated. The strong man Satan is out-maneuvered by the Stronger Man, Jesus. After He died, Christ descended into hell—not to suffer, not to do battle, but to announce and proclaim His victory over sin and death and the devil. The war is over. The devil has been defeated.

Now that Jesus is risen from the dead, Satan's strong weapons, the fear of death and death itself, are taken away. For you live in the sure hope of the resurrection of the body through Christ on the Last Day. Death is no longer the way Satan wins. Death is no longer the entrance to hell. In Christ death is now the entrance to victory, the entrance into heaven

itself, the passage from suffering and sorrow to relief and joy. This is true for all who die in Christ, as it is written, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors.’” [Rev. 14:13]

Jesus makes it clear that there can be no sitting on the fence in this matter. Christ says, “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters.” There is no neutrality when it comes to Christ. Either you’re with Him by faith and by Baptism or you’re against Him through unbelief. Either you take refuge in the Stronger Man, or you refuse Him and seek other refuge, drawing you back into the devil’s hands. Either you walk on the path of light or you wander down the path of darkness. There is no third option.

Even though the devil has been defeated and your salvation has been won, the devil still runs about pretending he is strong. He seeks to lure people away from the salvation of Christ, leading them into doubt and uncertainty and despair. Many fall for the trap, believing the strong man Satan rather than trusting in the Stronger Man, Jesus. So the evil spirits return to many people from whom they were cast out. The Holy Spirit, given in Baptism, is grieved and rejected by those lured away from Christ and, “The last state of that man is worse than the first.”

It is not enough for evil to be cast out. It must be replaced with the Savior. The unclean spirit must be replaced with the Holy Spirit.

Otherwise, a man succumbs to subtler and deeper sins, darker and more dangerous spirits. The Lord blesses those who remain steadfast in the faith, saying, "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it." To keep the Word of God is simply to hold on to it, to cling to it, to treasure it and trust in its promises. Those who do so are blessed. For the Word of God is living and active and powerful to save. It brings and sustains the presence of Christ's Spirit within you. The Word of God drives away the onslaughts of the evil one.

To keep the Word of God is to hold on to Christ. For He is the Word made flesh. Blessed are those who hear Jesus and cling to Him; for He is your refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. In the midst of your struggle, never forget that in Christ the victory is already won. The powers of darkness have already thrown their worst at your Lord. He let them spend their whole strength on His body on the cross; and then He dealt them the decisive blow by conquering the grave. This victory was given to you in Baptism. Blessed are those who cling to that Word of God given them with the water. Blessed are those in whom the Word of God dwells richly through holy Absolution and preaching. Blessed are those who trust in Christ and who are filled with His true Body and precious Blood. Over such the devil has no power. He can not touch you. You are in Christ, the Strongest Man, the Lord over death and the devil. Your eyes are ever toward the Lord, who plucks your feet out of the net, who conquers your enemy, who is your sure defense, who delivers you from all evil. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes . . .