

## YOUR ADVERSARY

As everybody knows, liberals are optimists, and conservatives are pessimists. Liberals are compassionate (bleeding hearts, is the way it is often put), and conservatives are stingy and tight. Of course, what “everybody knows” is very seldom true or right. “All general statements are false, including this one.” On the other hand, it really is true that “things are more the way they are today than they have ever been before.”

If I thought that what “everybody knows about Christianity” were really true, I would definitely become a Buddhist. On the other hand, if I thought that what most Americans “know about Buddhism” were really true – well, this is fast becoming complicated. We all realize that labels can be misleading. But often misconceptions remain popular enough to keep the rumors alive. So I have reminded you to be careful, because I am about to indulge in some generalities.

Most liberal Christians – and yes, I do know some exceptions – do not like to think about Satan. They do not like any constructs which suggest that some people are evil, that some penalties are just and necessary, that sometimes we need to go to war, that sometimes we need to reject and separate from some people, that sometimes exclusivity is more godly than inclusivity. And liberal Christians seldom understand or agree with one of Jesus’ major principles: in the language of Alcoholics Anonymous, “Attraction, not promotion.”

At this point you may be thinking that this is a strange array of disjointed and disconnected comments. And they are, except that they have a common source: the existence of Satan. Liberal Christians have a tendency to discount evil. They do not take evil very seriously. Some of them explain evil in different terms: evil is the result of a bad environment, inadequate education, or poverty. Liberal Christians think Jesus was in favor of being good to people and helping people, but they do not believe that Jesus is the Savior. That is, they do not think we need “saving” in any theological sense. They actually believe that if we gave everybody enough money, opportunity, education, food, clothing, and shelter, evil would disappear from the earth. If you don’t believe me, listen to the rhetoric. Pay attention to the design of the appeals and programs they sponsor. They do not think people need Jesus. They do essentially nothing to bring people to Jesus. They believe in money, education, food, shelter, health care, economic opportunity, and the like. Well, such things are

surely important. Everyone would like to have them. But letting them usurp the place of God? That is maybe not such a good idea.

Most of us come out of liberal backgrounds, so our first reaction is to respond favorably to most any plan or effort that claims the intention to help people. And some of you are already saying to yourselves: Jesus *apart* from money, education, food, shelter, health care, and economic opportunity is of no help, is of no value, and is quite irrelevant. There are no real Christians; there are only “rice Christians” (that is, if you don’t feed people, they cannot hear the Gospel). Over the years, many people have told me, sometimes with considerable heat and forcefulness, that this is the truth. In other words: Jesus was wrong. Man *does* live by bread alone. Or at least the bread has to come first. There is no salvation from sin, death, or the Devil. Jesus died on the Cross to increase our material prosperity. Unsure how to connect that up, most liberal Christians don’t have much to say about the Cross either. But they do have a lot to say about feeding the hungry and giving money to help the poor.

There is an alternate religion living inside many of the structures and constructs of the Christian church in our time. When it is named, it is most frequently called “Humanism.” It believes that all true power and true potential reside in humans, and that if any good is to be done, it will be done by humans. Christianity would, of course, see this as idolatry. Humanism is a religion of its own. As such, it has as much right as any other religion to seek followers, make its bid for influence in our world, and win the hearts and minds of any who are persuaded by it.

But Humanism is a parasite in our culture. It lives in the structures and organizations that were originally built for Jesus. It uses the money and devotion and caring that were called forth by Jesus. It has twisted the goals and purposes of Christendom away from Jesus and toward its own purposes. Of course, that is what parasites do. No Cowbird apologizes for using the nests of other birds, for killing their young, or for letting the parents of a different species labor to support and raise their Cowbird chicks. The rule is: if you are stupid enough to let them get away with it, then the parasites will thrive while you grow weaker and weaker. The liberal church is the Kirtland’s Warbler of our time. (Endangered both by habitat loss and because they are busy raising Cowbird chicks instead of their own young. I would tell you more about this parable, but you can doubtless fill in the details for yourself.)

In any case, Humanism believes that the belly is more important than the soul, and that material benefit is of greater value than spiritual development. Since physical well-being is the highest purpose in life, people who believe in prayer, who worship God, or who think obedience to some Holy Spirit is more important than pleasing people are obviously deluded. And anybody who believes in Satan is ludicrous and should be laughed to scorn.

Most of you know that I think Satan is very real. Satan is a sentient being from spiritual realms. I do not think all the mythology that surrounds Satan is accurate in some documentable way. The tail, the pitchfork, and the horns would make it very difficult for Satan to maneuver effectively among us. I suspect we all have unanswered questions about Satan and how the realities that we experience of temptation and evil have come to be the way they are. But that is small reason to get careless or to turn away from the subject entirely. Clearly Jesus, and all of His first-century followers, took Satan very seriously. They assumed that Satan was one of the “principalities and powers” with whom they had to contend. They further assumed that Satan’s wiles were never an excuse for any of their behavior, but they equally assumed that without God’s presence and help, they did not have much chance against the Devil.

### I.) YOUR ADVERSARY

Is that introduction enough for us to get serious about our Adversary? I wonder how many people present this morning actually believe that they have a non-human Adversary who is both powerful and dangerous. Some of you have lived lives of such quiet competence, have been born into circumstances of such harmony and blessing, that the thought of adversarial living – the contemplation of life as a struggle or a battle against dark forces – is simply alien to your experience? And having found such favor yourself, it does not cross your mind that millions of other humans do not experience the harmony and blessings that you count on? If so, I’m afraid you will have to somehow ignore and disregard this sermon.

The rest of us, I surmise, have run into opposition in one form or another throughout most of our lives. We have found ourselves in competition with other people from time to time. We have had various sorts of struggles within ourselves, some of them rather severe. Some of you have been in wars where it became overtly obvious that some people were shooting *at* you, and others *with* you. Some of us have been in other kinds of wars – movements for racial justice; efforts to feed hungry

people, improve education, reverse the ecological crises, and so forth. Some of us can even remember trying to defend ourselves, our friends, or our siblings from some form of injustice as far back as the first or second grade.

The rest of us know that at least from time to time, we struggle with adversaries. And sometimes the opposition cannot be explained by the negative influence we can identify in the world around us. Some days it seems to us that life is hard enough, just taking it straight. And we wonder, perhaps, why do we have to have adversaries? Why don't all forces in all of creation cooperate for the good of the whole – for the benefit of everybody? Why would anything or anyone wish to make things more difficult than they already are? Who has so much leisure time, and so few interests, that they can sit around with nothing better to do than make trouble for the rest of us? The problem is, we have run into some folk who seem to be like that.

Regardless of why, most of us know by now that with every good endeavor, there comes an adversary. Whether in our attempts to grow and develop and fulfill our own lives, or in trying to establish a career, build a family, or accomplish some purpose of justice or compassion or improvement for our surroundings or the society we live in – something always struggles against it. We run into opposition, inside and out. Something tries to block us, tries to undo our efforts, ridicules the approach, turns people against us, discourages us, or frightens us. Why is that? Are you sure it is wisdom to go on pretending it's your imagination? Who or what is the adversary? The old wisdom said: If you do not name your adversary, you have no chance to win through – no chance to reach the goal. Do any of you dare to name your adversary?

I will admit that it is a dangerous thing to name your adversary. Once the enemy knows you know, the battle escalates. It is still far *more* dangerous not to name the adversary. *That way*, the enemy can backbite, sabotage, lie, cheat, and steal at will, and we don't catch on to what is happening until it's too late. Many times, however, we name the adversary and realize afterward that we have only named a minor player in the drama, or we named only one of many strategies being used against us. No worthy opponent uses only one strategy against us. But whenever possible, we like to think of our troubles as coming at us one at a time. It's more comfortable to think that way, even if not very effective. I mean, if we saw the full warfare, we would have to look for a Savior, and you know how we hate to do that!

So we name a person we are having trouble with, or we name one inner fear, or we name one problem we are having at home or at work – and then we try to pretend that if we can just take care of this one thing, everything will be all right. It is one of the most famous phrases of our kind: “Then everything will be all right.” Peace On Earth. It is called *denial*, and it keeps us in our sin.

### II.) YOUR ADVERSARY THE DEVIL

Our New Testament passage for today is not content to explain all the mayhem in terms of our own troubles and mistakes and inadequacies alone, and not even if we add the troubles and mistakes of all the other people all around us. It puts it quite succinctly and unequivocally: It does not just say “your adversary.” It says, “YOUR ADVERSARY THE DEVIL.” (I Peter 5:8) I wonder how many people here this morning actually believe that they have an Adversary greater than all the lesser enemies and struggles and issues they face – one who doubtless uses all of the lesser adversaries and issues, yet who is greater than all of them put together. The real truth is: We hate to conclude that Satan is real, and that we have such an Adversary. It is too frightening to contemplate. It means our *need* is greater than we thought.

So I suspect it’s the other way around: People who do not take Satan seriously do not take the rigors of the spiritual life very seriously either. They have a relaxed attitude toward evil. They can pay attention to prayer, the Bible, and the church, and work the disciplines that Jesus taught – when they feel like it ... if they are in the mood. But if not, they think nothing very serious will happen. The fellowship of the church is nice, and it’s a good thing for people to band together and care about each other, and worship and play and pray together, and even teach their children some of the basic Christian values – if and when it’s convenient. But if not, nothing very serious will happen. I mean, it’s not like any of it is urgent; it’s not like it is a matter of life and death.

Do you understand what is going on? We are heightening the spiritual awareness here. That means we are heading into battle, like it or not. You think Satan is going to watch us turn into a redemptive community of faith and love and not try to stop that? Guess again! WE ARE GOING TO NEED EACH OTHER, AND TOGETHER WE ARE GOING TO NEED JESUS CHRIST. I don’t know how long we have to build the bonds, but it is never long enough. Please help us to build up this faith community. The truth is, I’m getting more help than I ever

expected. And I am exceedingly grateful for that. Only, we need all of us in on it together. Do any of you think this is a “take it or leave it” kind of affair? If your adversary is the Devil, that is not the case.

Many of the people I know do not really believe there is a spiritual battle going on here – a battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Why is it that I see this battle going on everywhere I look? I even see all of you struggling with it, whether you see it or call it that or not. Some of you get so weary or discouraged you can hardly see straight, and still you do not name the real Adversary. You still do not identify with the bit about “*Your adversary the devil.*”

I suspect that most of our friends imagine themselves living “in the middle” somewhere – living on neutral ground. So they are not living “at the ready.” They are not “on alert.” They do not expect a struggle or an attack at any moment or under any circumstances, dark or light. So they have no particular religion. Or they gravitate toward one of the religions that does not believe in evil. Or they go into standard churches but maintain for themselves a sleepy, comfortable approach – with minor spiritual disciplines and half-hearted measures – and they keep a camp with no sentries posted. After all, with no real enemy except ignorance and bad luck, a reasonable caution and a little common sense should do well enough, don’t you think?

At work, at play, in relationships, in efforts to do good or be helpful, it ought to be sufficient just to give it an honest try – to do a little bit when and where we can. But no “all night in prayer.” No fasting. No full-hearted conversion or commitment. No daily discipline of humility or study, or of prayer, forgiveness, or thanksgiving. Ten percent of your income is a little strenuous and inconvenient, don’t you think? After all, the church of Jesus Christ is perfectly adequate as it is. Against a symbolic or nonexistent foe, two percent is more than generous, don’t you think? Why should the church of Jesus Christ need resources anyway? I know; this is The New Church, and nobody among us thinks in such ways anymore.

In AA, the enemy is named. It is alcohol. In AA, the desire to drink is the devil. Salvation means being saved from this devil. All the steps and promises and hope for a new and better life depend on finding release from bondage to this Satan. It is always a surprise – fascinating and disconcerting – to realize that for quite some extended period of time, *we believed alcohol was our friend!* We were convinced that it was doing

wonderful things for us. Naturally, we were not marshaling any forces against it, since it was the welcome friend. Just like some of you think that pride, self-confidence, and being independent are your friends. And I did just name the things that work against love, fellowship, friendship, conversion, and giving our lives to God. It is called SIN – alienation from God – which is what leads to alienation from ourselves and from each other.

It is obvious, yet ever new, that the Devil never acts like the Devil. The Devil always smiles and talks and acts like a friend for as long as possible. It is a classic theme since the dawn of time that, over and over, we humans travel a long way with the Devil before we even suspect that something is amiss. Sometimes nearly everyone around us can see the ugly reality, but we are still hypnotized by the smile.

You don't think alcohol is cunning, baffling, powerful, and patient? Alcoholics personify it, just like Christians personify the Devil. You think it's just liquid in a bottle? This liquid in a bottle has destroyed the lives of millions of people. As a killer, it is always among the top three. You must be pretty gullible if you think it is not cunning, baffling, powerful, and patient. Alcoholics who do not personify it, do not recover. Just as Christians who do not personify Satan do not recover – because they do not take the full Message and program of the Christian Faith to heart; they do not take it seriously.

Enough of that. Let me ask you something: How do you explain God's compassion? Why do you suppose God keeps offering us such deep and incredible mercy and grace and forgiveness? Do you ever wonder why God would send the Son into such an ordeal as Good Friday? It is said it was done out of love and concern for us. If there is no Satan – if it is merely our own stubborn, willful blindness and rebellion – *why* is God so compassionate?

Some people do not have very much compassion or pity when they see others in trouble. Oh, there is a twinge here or there, but in many cases, it seems quite shallow and short-lived. I always suspect it's because they do not believe in Satan. They explain the trouble or hunger or hurt in human terms alone, and think that people would be fine if they would just wake up and try a little harder. They have no real appreciation for what people are up against. But Jesus does. And historically, the Christian church has known it too. That is why it has seen itself as the product – and known itself as the message-bearer – of God's mercy.

God is compassionate because humans are not just being a little spoiled and naughty. A judgmental, punishing God would do just fine, if that were the extent of the problem. God is compassionate because you have an Adversary of great cunning and skill. And God knows we need all the mercy, all the forgiveness and second chances, and all the HELP we can get.

### III.) YOUR ADVERSARY THE DEVIL PROWLs

We each call it as we see it. Anything else would be coercion. So I do not know how you see it, but I know how this passage in First Peter sees it: *“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters all over the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”* Sounds like bad news, but it makes my heart sing! What a relief to know it’s not only me. So *that* is what’s going on, and I am not alone. Satan is tracking all of them too – all of them, and all of you. They get tempted to throw it away, or go be self-centered and self-indulgent for a while, or just relax and take it easy and try to live the good life for themselves – just like I do. And that’s only the beginning – the seemingly harmless first whispers of the Evil One. How nice to know. It is therefore important to me – immensely important – that my brothers and sisters in the faith do not quit or give in, but that they stay in the battle and keep trusting in God. So, I don’t know – and sometimes it doesn’t seem like it very much – but maybe it is important to them that I stay faithful too. (Not get perfect – stay faithful.)

When your children go off to school in the morning, do they expect the Devil to be prowling around, looking for somebody unwary? Naturally, we do not want them frightened or troubled or overly concerned about such things, do we? Well, maybe a little concerned wouldn’t hurt – about drugs, strangers, sex, and not doing their homework. So you talk about those things with them. But seeing themselves on a spiritual path, and being instant suckers for Satan if they step off of it? Is that also what you teach them? And do you shield them, and teach them how to trust the Holy Spirit?

When you got married, did you consciously realize that Satan would make that relationship difficult, turn it bad, ruin it entirely – if he got half a chance? When you go to work in the morning, do you think your only adversaries are idiot drivers or the bad moods of fellow workers?

## YOUR ADVERSARY

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When you try to help somebody – from a personal friend, to the homeless, to improving the community, to joining some group that is going to save the environment – do you think it will go easily? That everybody who understands will help? That you will not run into an Adversary of great skill and cunning?

YOUR ADVERSARY THE DEVIL PROWLs. Life is more than a one-act play with ten good guys and two bad guys. I hope we are not just playing parlor games with the Life that Christ has invited us into. The ancient formula says: “Jesus came to save us from sin, death, and the Devil.” We have every reason to be confident and joyful and certain of the outcome – but not if we are asleep, or fail to call upon Him. *“Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour.”* I would just as soon it wouldn’t be any you.