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Adams UMC
2nd Sunday after Epiphany
January 19th, 2020

Renounce, Reject, Repent

Matthew 12:43-45

Focus: Evil is going too.

Function: The function of this sermon is to remember that as baptized Christians we are tasked to renounce, reject, and repent of the evil and harm we cause.

Will you pray with me and for me: God of all grace, we are thankful for who you are and what you have done and continue to do for us. Give us your strength to abide in your love and renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and to repent of our sin. May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips be acceptable and pleasing in thy sight, oh God, our strength and our redeemer. Speak, Lord Jesus, for your servants are listening.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.

Some of you may remember growing up, the three R's of recycling that were put up in schools and other areas in the 1990s and earlier. I recall seeing these with the famous sign the R in the middle and the arrows creating a circle. Reuse, Reduce, Recycle—that was the slogan. Reuse the plastics that can be reused. Reduce your waste. And Recycle the things that can be recycled—your glass, paper, plastics, cardboard. All of this—according to scientists—will help reduce the amount of waste that we human beings create that pollutes and destroys our planet. The three R's—reuse, reduce, recycle.

This popped into my head as I read through the baptismal covenant in preparation of last week's worship service when we reaffirmed our baptismal covenant that each of have made. And, I don't think it is any coincidence that the first historic question that is asked of each parent as they present their child or each candidate for baptism is this: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? Let me repeat that question for us. Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? On the surface, this may seem like an easy question—but when we dig down deep, we quickly realize that this question is not joking around. It is serious and it takes a lot of thought. What are the evil powers of this world? What do they look like? What are spiritual forces of wickedness? Have we actually accepted and participated in these things? What do we need to repent of?

In our text this morning, Jesus gives us a warning about spiritual forces of wickedness and evil powers. However, before we go there, there are two things that need to be cleared up. If you are looking for to explain what exactly evil is or where it came from, I am sorry to

disappoint you. I cannot do that. And, I'm in good company, I think. The only entity who can do that is God above. Not even Scripture answers that question. When we look through the entirety of Scripture, there is not one single attempt to explain where evil came from or exactly what evil is. And, this leads us to the second thing—and that is what the Bible is interested in telling us about evil. While Scripture doesn't tell us about the origins of evil, it does tell us that evil and God are not on the same playing field. As followers of Christ, we do not believe that. Evil is not coequal with God. Instead, over and over again, Scripture shows us that the amazing and holy love of God triumphs over evil time and time again.

But, that doesn't mean that evil and wickedness aren't dangerous—because they are. We know that firsthand. We see evidence of their destruction pretty much every time we turn on the news. And, Jesus in our text this morning, warns us about evil. No, I don't think Jesus is speaking literally about demonic possession. No, I don't think that Jesus is literally saying that an evil spirit that once possessed us will bring in more of its friends. But, I do think that Jesus is warning us about what we call in our baptismal vows as spiritual forces of wickedness and evil powers of this world and the damage that they might cause. These aren't just lofty ideas, Jesus warns us—they are personal. And, no matter what you believe about evil—there is a shadow figure out there that seeks to destroy whatever it is that God is building up. There is a shadow figure out there that uses the weapons of Satan, the weapons of hate, the weapons of evil or whatever you want to call it—that seeks to tear down the Kingdom that God is building in our very midst. And, as baptized Christians—we must understand—that this figure, this force, this energy is personal. It is let loose on us as people of God who know the truth that God claims us as God's own.

This warning is serious. It reminds us that the work as followers of Christ isn't over in that moment when we've been justified by the beautiful love of God. But, rather, that justifying work from Christ is just the beginning of our journey. The work truly begins in that moment through God's sanctifying grace. And, that grace seeks to lead us on the path of perfection. But, Jesus reminds us that there are unclean spirits—spiritual forces of wickedness, evil powers of this world—that seek to infect us and lead us to doing harm instead of love. In other words, Jesus is warning us that any Christian—that includes you and that includes me—is capable of being a harbinger of evil. No matter wherever we go, Jesus says, evil is going too.

As Jesus warns us, I can't help but ask what these unclean spirits are. What are these spiritual forces of wickedness? What are the evil powers of this world? What are the sins that we need to repent of? What does it mean to renounce, reject, and repent? What are these weapons of Satan or evil or wickedness that Jesus warns us about? Scholars believe that this warning from Jesus is a continuation in Matthew's gospel from an encounter that Jesus had with the Pharisees. Jesus has been healing on the sabbath and eating with sinners and preaching about the Kingdom of God and the pharisees say that he does all of these things not because he is the Son of God, but because he has conspired with a demon named Beelzebul. In other words, the pharisees have spread false information, have lied, have borne false witness against not only the Son of God, but against the very work that God was doing. And, they did this not because they didn't know—but because they didn't like what Jesus was doing. It's not

like they genuinely thought that about Jesus—it is because they didn't like that Jesus was disobeying their teachings, their understandings, their way thoughts, their world view. I can't help but wonder if the church follows not in the actions of Jesus—but in the actions of the Pharisees? When have we lied, spread false information, or sought to tear down something or someone simply because we didn't fully agree with them? When have we disregarded the humanity of others? When have we sought division instead of unity simply because we disagreed with someone? When have we spread hatred because we refused to see the image of God stamped upon another?

As baptized Christians we must understand that wherever we go, evil is going too.

There are forces out there that will seek to dehumanize you and those around you. There are forces out there that will do anything and everything to get you doubt God's love for your life, your worthiness of love, and convince you that you should feel nothing but shame and hatred for yourself and for others. But, the waters of baptism remind us that all of those thoughts are lies.

The waters of baptism are our reminder that while weeping may last for the night—joy will come in the morning. While evil may follow us, God goes with us too. One thing that I've always noticed in Matthew's gospel and has always confused me is that immediately after Jesus' baptism and the Spirit of God rests on him—the Spirit of God doesn't allow Jesus to rest. He is immediately driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. But now, I think I have an idea why Matthew presents the story this way. While we are going and following God—evil is going too—and we will encounter wilderness experiences. Some of us may even be in the wilderness right now. But, notice that the Spirit of God is with Christ...and never leaves. And, the same thing goes for us. We are not left alone when we are confronted with the unclean spirits of division and hatred in our world—God is forever and always with us. By renouncing we state we no longer live according the spirit of deceit and hatred. By rejecting we state that the selfishness and greed of this world no longer dictates our lives. And, by repenting—we acknowledge that we have been sinners, we are sinners, and we will sin again. But, thanks be to God for the waters of baptism which remind us over and over again that we are God's children and nothing, not even the forces of evil and wickedness can take that away.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.