

THE THREE QUESTIONS

Pentecost 2 – Year B: 1 Samuel 8:4-20; 11:14-15; Mark 3:20-35

One of my joys in the past five years has been serving as the Lutheran appointment on the Anglican Church of Canada's Liturgy Task Force, a committee of approximately 12 whose mandate is to provide some new texts for use in Anglican and Lutheran worship. It wasn't long into our discussions on the rites in current use in the church that we heard of the discomfort of many concerning the three questions on evil asked of baptismal candidates and their sponsors, the same formula, incidentally, that Catholics use at baptisms, and that Lutherans typically use, both in our baptismal rite and in the Affirmation of Baptism. I say "typically," because there is an option in the Leader's edition of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* for one question, rather than three, a single question that has more contemporary language concerning the presence and effect of evil in human life, especially human life as viewed through the lens of the Christian faith.

Asking the three questions is an old custom from an old rite. One of the members of the Liturgy Task Force discovered after some research that the questions prompting the renunciation of evil have been present in Christian worship for at least 1,000 years, and probably longer; also that there may have been a practice of facing west for the renunciation of evil, the opposite direction one traditionally faced in Christian worship. Having renounced the devil, his works, and all his empty promises, baptismal candidates would then turn 180° and face east when asked, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Saviour?...Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?...Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?" Three more questions.

In *contemporary* Catholic liturgy, the questions used to determine Christian faith are based on the content of the three articles of the Apostles' Creed, but the answer to all questions, both renouncing evil and professing faith in God, Christ, and Spirit is always "I do." Present-day Lutherans still use the ancient formula "I renounce them" when questioned about the forces of evil. Interestingly, our old *Lutheran Book of Worship* had only one question renouncing evil, and the answer was simply, "I do." The new book is more traditional than the old book!

The fact that there are and were three questions could reflect an accepted liturgical formula whose roots are present in Hebrew temple worship. Many liturgists, however, have reasoned that the three questions and their renunciations balance the three questions and three professions of faith that use the three articles of the Apostles' Creed – "I believe in God ...I believe in Jesus Christ ...and I believe in the Holy Spirit." They argue for the mathematical balance the three-against-three provides.

It will be interesting for me to see how the Liturgy Task Force responds to the general discomfort with the three questions. Will they do as the Lutherans have done and provide an alternate single question? Some of the discomfort is probably with the quaint reference to "the devil" or "Satan" as it appears in some liturgies.

References to Satan and the devil in the Bible are usually located in its poetic literature or used as a metaphor for evil. The *epistles* use the devil as a metaphor for evil. And it is in this sense that is suggested in the first of our three questions: "Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?" I will often spend time with baptismal families, confirmands, and new members in explaining the archaic use of the word "devil" in an otherwise contemporary document. In popular culture, the devil is most likely a cartoon, a little red imp with tail and pitchfork or something dark and sinister in fictional literature and film. Good old Voldemort in *Harry Potter* or Moriarty in *Sherlock*. The devil in both caricature and metaphor is always male, it seems.

We have neither cartoons nor the demons of literature or film in mind, I assure people, when we use the word "devil." The devil Christians renounce, the devil Lutherans renounce, is the evil that destroys life and denies God's presence and power within and among us. Evil is not readily objectified by Christians, without first acknowledging that *everyone* struggles. *Everyone* struggles.

And maybe we should just leave it there, and let that thought find home. But, unfortunately, it is not true: more often we tolerate evil, rather than struggle with it. Perhaps we have become inured to it, because we find it overwhelming.

In this morning's First Reading, the judge Samuel is in conflict with the Hebrew people of his day. Samuel feels, initially, that they have rejected his leadership and want to replace him with a king. According to the account, God corrects his take on the situation, saying that it is not personal; that it is the rebellious nature of the people, the same that [quote] "they have done to me from the day that I brought them up out of Egypt...forsaking me and serving other gods" [end quote]. "Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?" [p. 229, *ELW*]. Not so much. We're used to them. We prefer to meet life on our own terms.

The Samuel reading is interesting, because it describes the natural consequences of opting for the inherent hierarchy of being led by a king, as opposed to the kind of mentoring they have had through a succession of religious leaders, and latterly judges. What is described in the passage is a vision of full-blown hierarchy, with everyone serving the king who will, in turn, organize them to serve militarily and suppress other people. Twice Samuel asks them, "Are you sure?" And twice they answer, "We want to be like other nations." "Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?" [p. 229, *ELW*]. "No. We want to take matters into our own hands and determine our own outcomes." None of this is shocking to us. World history and what goes on among nations in our world today is entirely consistent with the instinct identified in this passage from 1 Samuel. We have learned too well the ways of the world; Christians and Jews are "like other nations".

In today's Gospel, there is a similar squaring off. Jesus' prophetic ministry has already brought him into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees, we read earlier in Mark. He heals on the Sabbath, defiling it, according to them. He goes head-to-head with his critics concerning the spirit of the law, as opposed to the letter of the law. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. By the time he arrives at his home town, his stand for radical justice and sacrificial love – what we now call 'the truth of the gospel' – has people saying, "He has gone out of his mind." If we renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God [p. 229, *ELW*], will people think that we have gone out of our mind?

One of the most conspicuous examples of the people of God in Canada tolerating evil is our treatment of the people of our First Nations in the so-called Indian Residential Schools, run by several Canadian churches and funded by our federal government. Eventually, the churches and government faced the horror of abuse and racism visited upon our First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, and especially the children. One liturgy of repentance has been the five-year-long Truth and Reconciliation Commission, funded by the federal government. The commission's mandate has been to inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools. The Commission has documented the truth of survivors, families, communities and anyone personally affected by the Indian Residential Schools experience. The stories and the pain have been horrendous. Over 4,000 children died at the hands of teachers, priests, ministers, and religious – responsible adults, all of them supposedly church people. The culture, religion, and personhood of our indigenous peoples was denigrated and rejected, not only in the schools, but by Canadian society in general. For most of my life, Canadians have tolerated the evil that was within and among us, that was part-and-parcel of what it meant to be a Canadian. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission closed this past week in Ottawa with four days of speeches, ritual and ceremony. Yesterday, I ran into Pastor Phil Heinze, our Synod's former Director of Public Policy and Service Ministries. He was present in Ottawa for most of the closing TRC events. I asked him, "What now?" And he said, "That's the real question, isn't it? We must keep talking, we must keep listening, we must not forget what has happened."

I am not uncomfortable with the three questions on evil in our baptism rites. In fact, I think that their presence draws a line in the sand (so to speak) between Christian discipleship and everything else we might espouse. We need those questions; and we need to keep asking them. Three times is just the beginning of a daily turning from sin and turning toward Jesus. Our call in Holy Baptism, our gospel work, in the strength and grace of our baptism into Jesus Christ is to renounce evil whenever and wherever it presents itself with whatever resources and opportunities we have. To look for evil within and among and around us, and counter it with the gospel we love more. People may say that we are "out of our mind" by insisting on Christ's radical justice and sacrificial love. But I can't think of a better way of honoring the covenant that is our baptism into Christ.

A crowd was sitting around Jesus; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who

sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Will you turn to Jesus? Will you put your whole trust in his grace and love?