

WHEN THE SONS OF SCEVA SCURRY
Acts 19:11-20

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on August 25, 2019, the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series on the Acts of the Apostles, entitled "When..."

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.

Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying,

'I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.'

Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this.

But the evil spirit said to them in reply,

'Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?'

Then the man with the evil spirit leapt on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded.

When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised. Also many of those who became believers confessed and disclosed their practices. A number of those who practised magic collected their books and burned them publicly; when the value of these books was calculated, it was found to come to fifty thousand silver coins. So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

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It was great to be back in worship last Sunday after a three-week vacation in Swan's Island, Maine, where Maggie and I have gone for seven of the last ten summers. Some of you have seen more pictures of our vacation on Facebook than I even knew were being taken, but you have told me that it looks like we had a wonderful time. We did. Everyone who finds a place of beauty in which they can know respite is blessed; we have come to know such blessing through the people, the place and the pace found on this island of about 300 people whose families make their living fishing for lobster, plus a few hundred summer people.

It was also wonderful to come back to the calling of an Associate Pastor. The meeting in which a congregation calls someone to whom they entrust the title and role of "pastor" is a moving experience for Presbyterians. We had that experience over a decade ago when we called Patrick and then when we called Casey FitzGerald. We had it two and a half years ago when we called Whitney. And we had it last Sunday when we called Jacob Bolton.

I was proud of so much last Sunday:

- The Associate Pastor Nominating Committee in the process they followed and in the presentation they made
- Jacob for the way he met people and preached and led worship.
- But most of all I was proud of you, for the path on which we embarked four years ago to expand our ministry through this “four-pastor” model; for the financial commitment you made to it; for everyone’s patience over changes and time it has taken to unfold. But I was most proud of you for the worship attendance last Sunday, the number who stayed for the congregational meeting, and the questions you asked and comments you made.

It was a great Sunday on which to return from vacation; and you played a huge part in making it a joyful return.

I.

But now we are back for two more Sundays on Acts. Given that today’s sermon concerns “evil” and next week’s concerns “disagreement,” we may feel like we are being drawn back to “weeping that tarries for the night” rather than “joy that comes with the morning.”¹ But hopefully we can experience a wise joy that comes through these Biblical texts when we face powers in our world or lives that we believe are evil and at times in which we deeply disagree with one another.

In presenting the story of seven sons of Sceva scurrying from an evil spirit who has recognized and called out an evil spirit within them, Luke helps us approach the *power of evil* with some welcome but dark humor. We may have to loosen our minds a bit to catch the slapstick in this story.

Prior to the point in which we join the story, the Apostle Paul has been on a journey to take the explosive and inspiring power of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ from its base in Judaism into the Greco-Roman world. With a handful of colleagues, Paul has spent two years in Ephesus, a coastal city, rich in resources, located on the western edge of present day Turkey. About a quarter of a million people live in Ephesus when Paul arrives, ranking it behind Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch as the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire.² Think Houston. Think Phoenix. Think Philadelphia in. Not the three largest, but close.

Paul and his colleagues have made Ephesus a center of their operations, and on a regular basis Paul speaks publicly at synagogues and at a local meeting hall known as the school of Tyrannus. Paul and his colleagues spend over two years preaching, teaching, building the community of the church in ways that are solid but less dramatic than what happens in our passage.³ But Luke also tells us that:

God did *extraordinary* miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.

Like Paul, like Jesus: “If only I touch the hem of his garment, I will be made well.”⁴

¹ Psalm 30:5.

² Matthew L. Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 136.

³ Skinner 137.

⁴ Matthew 9:21.

Then Luke tells us that:

Some itinerant Jewish exorcists try to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who have evil spirits.

Luke even notes that seven – count them, “seven” – “sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva” try to co-opt the powers of Christ for their own powers of magic.

But the evil spirit in a man Paul is healing says to the sons of Sceva, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?”

- Who are you to do what Jesus did?
- Who are you to do what Paul is doing?
- Who are you to manipulate the Spirit of God for your own aims?

Then the evil spirit leads the man physically to “leap” on the seven sons of Sceva, to master them, and to so overpower them that they scurry out of town, wounded and naked.

Now as you can imagine, even though Ephesus has a quarter of a million people and promises some of the anonymity of city life, seven sons of a leading local religious figure fleeing town wounded and naked is a bit too much to go unnoticed. In fact, Luke says: “Everyone was awestruck.” And he adds: “The name of the Lord was praised.”

Then Luke narrates that

- Many confess and disclose their own magical practices.
- They go to their homes, clean out their closets, bring back to the public square instruction books and manuals of magic they have used over the years.
- There is a community bonfire that leads to an old-fashioned book burning.
- Someone places the value of the flaming books at 50,000 silver coins, a large sum in any currency.

Luke concludes the story with triumphant understatement:

“So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.”

In the slapstick of this story, and the easy alliteration of “seven sons of Sceva scurrying,” it is easy for us to assume that this is a story in which the *power of good* overcomes the *power of evil*.

But a detail we need to notice is that it is actually the power of evil in one man Paul is healing that recognizes a *similar* power of evil in the sons of Sceva and sends them to their scurrying. It is neither Paul, nor the Word of God, nor the Holy Spirit that drives out evil. Rather the power that calls out the evil spirit in the sons of Sceva is an evil spirit in an unnamed man who has come to Paul for healing.⁵ In this story, it is *evil defeating evil* that allows the good to prevail.

⁵ Just like in the seventeenth chapter of the Book of Revelation, in which “the beast” – a potent symbol of evil – rises up and destroys the evil city Babylon.

It is this point on which I want to spend a few minutes.

II.

I want to say at the outset that the use of the word “evil” can be fraught with on the one hand the *danger of overstatement* and on the other the *danger of naiveté*.

- To label something as evil is often to end a conversation about it.
- But not to recognize something as evil is often to avoid the reality and evade the truth beneath the name. It can represent a failure to trust Jesus’ oft-quoted phrase, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”⁶

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One evil in the story before us is an evil spirit that lies behind the disease of the man who is brought to Paul; *the other* is the desire of the sons of Sceva to use whatever healing power Paul has for their own aims.

Now there are doubtless other forms of evil in our lives and in our world:

- Personal
- Spiritual
- Sexual
- Financial
- Social
- Political.

In judging people and events that come before us, *we* have to ultimately decide for ourselves *what* deserves the title of evil and what does not.

Once we have made that decision, we then must decide – as a matter of conscience and as a matter of pragmatism – *how* to deal with the evil we have decided exists.

In this story, the power of evil inhabiting the man recognizes and defeats the power of evil in the seven sons of Sceva. The picture is one of evil folding back on itself, devouring itself, failing of its own accord.

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But evil devouring itself is not the only way that the Old and New Testaments depict the triumph of good over evil. Sometimes the Temple simply must be stormed, the money changers driven out.⁷ But waiting for evil to implode is one of the ways found in the Bible.

Earlier in Acts, a Pharisee named Gamaliel had said: “...if this plan or undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is from God, you will not be able to overcome [it].”⁸

This is a positive way of saying that in the end, that which is evil will collapse of its own accord or be destroyed by an equally evil power that paves the way for good to prevail.

⁶ John 8:32 KJV.

⁷ Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:13-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-16.

⁸ Acts 5:37-38.

I personally believe that there is a lot of truth to this.

- I have seen people who are destructive in politics, in the church, in families, in schools, in organizations and communities, in national and world history, collapse under the weight of the evil they bear and carry out.
- The trouble is, they do a lot of damage before the collapse, sometimes unspeakable damage. It is a judgement call on our part (and sometimes on the part of world leaders) whether or not they will collapse; and thus we cannot always adopt this “wait and see” posture in terms of facing evil.

In a statement made famous in abridged form by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. the abolitionist and reformer Theodore Parker said:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.⁹

Our faith in that bending, and our belief that ultimately evil will be defeated, is, as Parker says, a matter of conscience. But when we lean in that direction, such faith can be a source of hope, resolve, and action, as we wait for the arc to *begin* its bend toward justice or *to get closer* and closer to its destination.

III.

Because of this hope, our *waiting for evil to collapse* does not have to be passive.

Notice in this chapter, that Paul and his colleagues are not on the sideline, waiting for the sons of Sceva to disappear on their own. Rather,

- They come to Ephesus.
- They spend two years.
- They preach.
- They teach.
- They establish relationships.
- They build a community on the ground.

Thus, when the sons of Sceva are defeated, Paul and his colleagues have paved the way, provided a structure, and are ready to step in and move the gospel forward. They don't directly take on the sons of Sceva themselves, but they provide the *structure* and *presence* in which that opposition can occur, in which God's full word and way can prevail, and in which the future is open for the more equitable bending of the moral arc of the universe.

⁹ Theodore Parker, *Ten Sermons on Religion* (1853), available at https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Theodore_Parker.

IV.

At two important turning points in my life – one personal, one professional – I have been in the throes of what I consider to be evil. During those bleak times, I did what I could around the edges to lessen its destruction, but mostly I tried to stay grounded and not flee. I often repeated to myself: *Deliver me from evil. Deliver me from evil. Deliver me from evil.*¹⁰

Because it is a judgement call – made in the conscience – whether or not to storm the temple or wait for evil to collapse of its own accord, I never try to judge people who take evil on more directly than I do. In many ways I admire them. But the experience that has been most true to me is to wait for the sons of Sceva to implode and scurry out of town. In some instances, I am able to make that choice because I live in this country, because I am male, because I am white, and because I am privileged compared to most of the world's population.

My stance of waiting doesn't mean that a lot of people have not been hurt – myself included – as I or we have waited for justice to unfold. It doesn't mean that the moral arc of the universe has not been ever so slow in its bending toward justice. But for the most part, I have been fortunate staying alive and present to see the sons of Sceva scurry and the way of God *begin* to prevail.

And for that all I know to do is be grateful, attentive, living on the cusp between waiting and action, action and waiting, reasonably confident that in the promise and providence of God, the sons of Sceva will scurry out of town, not always “soon and very soon,” but sometimes so.

Amen.

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¹⁰ Matthew 6:13 made singular.