

I never give titles to my sermons. Books should have a title; great works of art should have a name. The best title any sermon could have is the one already in use: “This is the word of the Lord.” If anything I say comes even vaguely close to that I would be thrilled. Other than that, why waste time coming up with a title? On the other hand, I was thinking, if I really had to give a title to what I want to say today it would probably be “Good is good but evil is evil.” See...I told you I wasn't very good at titles.

“Good is good but evil is evil.” There are lots of reasons why that is dumb title: it's simplistic, it's redundant, it's obvious, it doesn't tell you anything you don't already know. But just maybe, the whole point of today's gospel is that there is something so simple and so obvious that we aren't really paying attention to it – but we should.

So, to again to keep it simple, let's use a subtitle: “we are at war.” I'm not talking politically; I talking spiritually. There is an enemy, but too often we aren't very good at figuring out who that enemy really is: Who is our enemy?

- **Not Protestants.** For almost 500 years, lots of Catholics thought our enemies were the “Protestant heretics,” and they addressed that problem by consigning their bodies to battlefields and their souls to Hell. Gradually, the light dawned: Protestants are not our enemies; they are our “separated brothers.” In fact, they are fighting the enemy alongside us.
- **Not Jews.** For almost two thousand years too many Christians thought that was the case and they did such unchristian things to our “fathers in the faith” that

we made it almost impossible for the Jews to see their God in us.

- **Not Muslims**, who are often more loyal to their understanding of Christ as a prophet than we are to Christ our savior; they often live more godly lives following a half-truth than we do with the whole truth.

To keep the Vatican happy let me affirm that it does matter what faith you follow and we need to be secure in the knowledge that we have chosen the right path. Yet in the first part of today's gospel Jesus is quite clear that anyone who does good is an ally in this great struggle.

Jesus rebukes John's effort to discriminate someone who is not part of their inner circle with the reminder that he is here to love and to heal; he is not interested in copyrights or credits. If you aren't working against us then you are a friend and we need all the help we can get. "Good is good" and it doesn't matter who does it.

Back to identifying our enemy.

- Our enemies are not "the liberals" or "the right wingers" – those are political terms and whatever might be good or bad about political stances, they are neither the cause nor the cure of our present spiritual warfare.
- Our enemies are not even the anti-Catholic bigots who want to persecute us or the terrorists who want to either enslave or destroy us.
- The enemy is not the media or the elite.
- Our enemies are not the traitors from within the Church – like the prominent politicians who claim to be Catholic and then publicly reject what we hold sacred.

We may and should strongly oppose all those people and reject their narrow, messed up world view, but really-- in the bigger picture of things -- they too are victims of the war and in need of healing. "Pray for those who persecute you" said the Lord; maybe we haven't been doing enough praying lately.

We do know the enemy but it isn't fashionable to admit it these days. Bluntly – the enemy is sin and sin can do what no other enemy can ever accomplish. Sin can send you to hell. Don't hear that much these days, do you? In our modern world lots of people have replaced the gospel of Jesus Christ with the "gospel of nice." The "Gospel of Nice" never mentions "hell" because it might hurt someone's feelings and it never corrects another for fear of losing human support or friendship. The "gospel of nice" sees the suffering and pain of the world but explains away everything as effects of a bad environment, or social pressure, systematic racism or just the inevitable result of exercising of that sacred and infallible right to choose.

And, of course, **doing what we want** is the highest good, they say. They are almost right. We do have free will and we can choose. They somehow missed the rest of the sentence which says: we are responsible and accountable for what we choose. That consequence might be as drastic as choosing to go to hell; it is an option that Jesus warns us about in the real gospel.

The Lord teaches the people in today's Gospel about the reality of hell in order to inform them that they do have to take responsibility for their actions and they need to realize that they can choose to be eternally separated from God and from all that is good.

That is hell. The Catechism defines it this way: "state of definitive self-exclusion from with God." The way a person winds up in hell, says the Catechism, is "to die in sin without repenting and without accepting God's merciful love."

The doctrine of hell affirms human freedom - choice - in the most radical way possible. It's not only about how you choose to spend the rest of today, not just how you spend the next week, not just how you spend your retirement. We are talking about how you spend eternity; it's what you will do forever. It is ironic that some people accuse the Catholic Church of being "anti-choice." On the contrary, we reverence choice. We believe that God has placed within each of us a breathtaking freedom. I can choose to spend eternity with God or to separate myself from him forever.

The doctrine of hell poses problems for people today. Truthfully, our society does have a strong "victim mentality" that influences all of us. If things go wrong, we look for others to blame. Deep down, freedom scares us. We don't want that responsibility, we reject that possibility. Jesus' teaching on hell means that in the end, you and I are free. Free to make a choice that is so unimaginably bad for us that Jesus said it would better to cut off a hand or lose an eye. That horrible loss would be less than trivial compared to losing God. Some think that a loving, merciful God would not allow anyone to spend eternity in hell. But that isn't really God's choice. God did not create hell – we make it ourselves - nor does he will anyone to go there. The choice, that decision is ours. That should scare us. "Evil is evil."

Now, I don't want anyone to leave here with the idea they are doomed. To think that would be to ignore the rest of what Jesus taught us: that no matter what you have done, as long as you have breath in you, the Lord invites you to come to him. God wants you to spend eternity with him - and he will do everything possible to get you there.

The one thing he will not – can not - do is to take away your freedom to make that choice because that same freedom is also the basis for our ability to love. Sin is real and powerful and no one has ever avoided it by pretending it isn't there. There is a war going on but – if we don't give up the fight, don't surrender to sin -- with God's help we can win it.