

## KEEP ON GUARD!

Preached by Douglas Norris at the First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
May 19, 1985

John 17:9-16

When Jesus prays for you, for what does he ask? We have a clue in our lesson today. According to John, after the Last Supper, before he was arrested and executed, Jesus prayed for his disciples. I suspect that the prayer for his disciples at that time in history is the same prayer Jesus prays for his present disciples, for you and me. For what does Jesus pray? Hear his words in John 17:15, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but I do ask that you keep them safe from the Evil One." Out of all the petitions that Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer, on the eve of his death, his last concern expressed on this earth for his disciples was the petition, "Deliver them from evil." So, my sermon this morning is: Keep on guard! Keep on guard against the Evil One.

This topic is foreign to us. We are comfortable here on the Peninsula and, because we are comfortable, we are vulnerable. It is difficult for us to imagine a devil, or a force, a power, a spirit, that is unfriendly to us. We live in comfortable homes, ideal communities; we have nice neighbors, excellent schools, dedicated public servants. We enjoy good lives; why picture devils, demons, evil?

Probably most of us here were reared either in a theology of a literal devil with red tail and horns, seeking to attack us; or, at the other extreme, we were reared in a theology that had no devil at all. Liberal theology does not take the Evil One seriously. Our Methodist literature, articles, Sunday School curriculum, sermons, by and large over the years, have reflected liberal theology. Liberals believe that the world is getting better, that life is improving, that there is an evolutionary development resulting in the kingdom of God. Liberals believe that, with improved schools, trained minds, scientifically oriented beliefs, and humanitarian causes, the kingdom of God will come in our society. In classical liberal theology, there is little room for sin, evil, or the devil.

But liberal theology is dead, for it has proven itself wholly inadequate. Liberal theology was not even taken seriously when I was in seminary, but the news of the burial of liberal theology has not completely reached the laity. The horrors and atrocities of World War II dealt liberal theology a deathblow. Liberal theology couldn't understand, explain or rationalize Hitler, the Nazi movement, and the postwar Communist aggression and cruelty. If there were any lingering beliefs in the evolutionary improvement of humankind, they were certainly dispelled by the Vietnam War where even our own beloved and "saintly" nation with its high ideals engaged in immoral, cruel acts of aggression. The Vietnam War morality is yet alive, especially in Philadelphia where police wantonly bomb a residence, killing children, endangering the neighborhood, seemingly acting out the inscrutable logic, "We had to destroy the village in order to save it."

The devil is alive and well. We must have a theology that takes the devil into account, that takes evil seriously. We must keep on guard, lest we, too, are tempted to fall into the traps set by the Evil One. My plea is that we keep up our defenses, that we discern, that we keep on guard.

Do I sound bizarre? I don't think so. Just a few years ago, we taught our children to be friendly, to be open, and to welcome strangers. Now, we teach our children: "Don't talk to strangers. Don't let strangers give you anything to eat or drink. Never get into a stranger's auto. Do not hitchhike. Do not pick up hitchhikers." We have learned the hard way that the world is not necessarily a friendly place; and that wariness applies to the intangible, to the spiritual world as well, for there is a spiritual world as there is a physical world.

We believe that God is a spirit. God is not a person but spirit, the spirit of creativity, the spirit of good, the spirit of love. God is that energy that creates good, that reconciles, heals. The devil or the Evil One is the spirit of evil, the spirit of destruction, the spirit of hatred. The New Testament assumes a world view that includes demons, spirits, forces called principalities, powers. According to the New Testament, we live in a hostile environment. Christ conquered the forces of evil through the resurrection. In that is our hope. Victory is assured, but you must keep on guard. The hymn we have just sung expresses the New Testament view. Written by Andrew of Crete who lived in the seventh century:

Christian, dost thou see them On the holy ground,  
How the powers of darkness Rage thy steps around?  
Christian, dost thou feel them, How they work within,  
Striving, tempting, luring, Goading into sin?

"Keep them safe from the Evil One," Jesus prayed. In John 17:11, Jesus prayed, "Keep those you have given me true to your name." Keep them faithful, loyal. In John 17:17-18, Jesus continues, "Sanctify them in the truth...As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Sanctify means to consecrate, to set apart for a special task. Jesus has called us to do his work here on this earth. We have been called, baptized, confirmed, consecrated, set apart to be God's people. We are a covenant people. Keep us safe from the Evil One in order to do God's calling, here in the First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto.

Now, what are the Devil's tactics? How does the Evil One seek to weaken and destroy God's people? I searched the New Testament this week to find a clue, and it seems to me that what the Evil One is tempting each of us to do is to compromise. Compromise is the devil's tactic. Jesus himself was not immune to temptation and to struggle. As even Jesus was tempted and had to keep on guard, how much more do you and I need to keep on guard. There in the wilderness for forty days, the devil tempted Jesus to compromise his commitment to a spiritual kingdom and to be a material and political messiah. Jesus was tempted to turn the stones into bread. By giving free bread to people, Jesus was certainly assured of followers, but what kind of followers? What kind of commitment? Jesus was tempted to compromise his utter trust in God. Jesus was tempted to compromise his obedience to God's will.

You and I need to keep on guard because the devil, the spirit of evil, seeks to compromise us. The Evil One nudges and whispers, "Take care of yourself. Look out for yourself. What's in it for you? Do you get free bread? Do you get security? Will you get rich? Will you be happy? Is it fun?" The Lord says, "You are here on this earth for a purpose. You are put here to help me save the world. You are here to serve others, to overcome self-centeredness and selfishness, to learn how to love me, to become less preoccupied with things and to center more in love." The devil says, "Forget it. Enjoy yourself. Enjoy your money. Spend it all on yourself. Compromise; it won't hurt."

We are tempted to compromise our principles. Cheat a little, relax, smooth out the corners. Take a puff. Take a drink. Go with the crowd. Compromise your marriage vows. One time won't hurt. Just a little fun.

We are tempted to compromise our commitment to the ideal Jesus taught us. We are tempted to be content with less, to be content with mediocrity. "Oh, why work so hard? What will it matter? Give up your ideals. Get fat and lazy."

We are tempted to compromise our commitment to justice, and to lower our concern for the poor and the mistreated. It is easier not to get involved in problems, not to get involved in the Central American struggle, or the movement against apartheid in South Africa. We rationalize by saying we don't know all the facts, or we feel we are too busy with our own concerns.

We are tempted to compromise our commitment to Christ's church. The devil seeks to weaken the church. We heard the vows of membership again today. We were reminded again of what church membership means, what it means to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Minimally, discipleship means to support the church with prayer, attendance, financial resources and service. It is so easy, so tempting, to compromise: "Oh, they won't miss me..." God misses you, and the devil rejoices. "Oh, I'm not needed; they've got so many members at that church..." The church gets weaker, and the devil rejoices. "Oh, I can't tithe; I can't give 10%. I need too much for myself. I must plan for my future..." The church gets weaker; the ministry and mission suffer. The church cannot do or be its best without a strong financial base to provide staff, programs, a building, utilities, maintenance, etc. The church gets weaker, makes cuts, and the devil rejoices, sends up a cheer.

Keep on guard. Hold up the shield of commitment. Keep the high calling of Christ before you. You aren't making token contributions to the church as if you are going to a movie. Your offering is your part of God's work. How privileged you are! God has given you the means, the resources, by which you can support his ministry. Your attendance is not something you do to be entertained. Your attendance is a witness. You are taking a stand for the Lord. I remember Mrs. Kessler in one of my former churches. Mrs. Kessler was deaf. She could only understand a one-on-one conversation. She did not hear the sermon or even the music, yet she never missed a Sunday service. I asked her once why she came to church when she couldn't hear. She replied, "I want them to know whose side I'm on!"

Your service is just not something you do when you don't have anything else to do. You are called to serve, to take on causes, to take risks, to get involved in social issues as God calls you. You count! Don't let the Evil One compromise you. Don't sell out. Don't let hurt feelings or disillusionment keep you from your mission.

Keep on guard. Keep in prayer. The best protection is to keep in prayer. As the hymn urges, "Watch and pray." Keep on guard and pray. God, keep me in your care. Keep me pure. Keep me righteous. Keep me in the truth. Keep my commitments strong for the sake of Jesus; not for my comfort, but for the sake of your work, into which I have been called.

O Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. O Lord, keep us safe from the Evil One.

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