

Angels, Demons, and Wrestlers

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You may quote portions of the following, with an appropriate citation

I had a very interesting experience last weekend – I visited a prison. It wasn't just any prison - it was for violent youth offenders. Murderers, rapists, armed robbers, etc. – all under 18. One of my best friends teaches there and she loves it, so I was intrigued. Last Saturday I was a guest teacher, introducing the students to the hero's journey.

I had a great time. There was one girl in particular who struck me as intelligent, personable, funny, and very motivated to learn. I couldn't imagine why she was in such a place. When I asked my friend, she simply said, "Murder."

Oh.

I consider myself a pretty good judge of character, and never would I have thought of this girl as violent. She seemed, instead, to be an ideal student. So was I wrong? Was she really a murderer just pretending to be a good student? Or was she really the sort of student teachers love, who made one very bad decision at one point in her young life?

Or, and this seems most likely to me, is she a pronounced example of the tensions that exist within all of us between good and evil, between our angelic and demonic natures? Is it not true that all of us have the capacity to harm, even to kill? Jesus said that being angry with others was tantamount to killing them. Haven't you been there? I have.

Whenever I hear stories about people beating their children, or going ballistic at work, or even blowing something up – I understand (and it's not just menopause). I hasten to add that I'd never do those things – but neither do I think that the demonic forces of human nature have been totally purged within me. The kids in prison for uncontrolled rampages are just a step or two further on the path than I was as a teenager with my controlled, internalized rampages. I can't know for certain, of course, but I would guess that all of us wrestle with demons at many points in our lives.

Thank God, Jesus also said that the kingdom of heaven is among and within us. We don't just have the capacity for evil – we have the capacity for Godliness. The heavenly hosts surround us and even inspire us, but don't we ignore them much more than we should? It is very possible that the grace of forgiveness and love is harder to accept than the violence of fear and hatred. We grip tightly our righteous judgments, feeding them in order to fend off the demons, in order to make ourselves feel worthy and whole.

We too often assume that because we aren't as bad as *those* people, we must be pretty darn good.

Jesus had something to say about that, too. "You hypocrite," he said. "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."

What sort of logs can there be in the eyes of people like us who go to church every Sunday? Aren't we really so much better than, say, teenage murderers? For the sake of argument let's say we have defeated the demons within us, but ... BUT, have we engaged the angels as well?

Wrestling with those angels is harder than wrestling with the demons, because simply *not* doing what is wrong is much, much easier than *doing* what is right – and they aren't the same thing.

Jacob wrestled with the angel until morning on his way to meet a brother he had wronged many years before. Was he afraid? Absolutely. But he went anyway, ready to face the consequences from Esau. I suspect Esau had spent a few sleepless nights, too, because later in Genesis 33 it tells us, "But Esau ran to meet Jacob, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept."

It is so tempting to turn away from the pain, sorrow, and evil of the world, but we need to run to meet it with God's love and grace.

It is not enough, my friends, that we didn't steal our fish and bread. We need to go a step farther – we need to unpack the loaves and fishes we've been blest with and spread them around.

It's not enough that we love our own children – we need to love others as well, especially those in need.

It's not enough that we're not as "bad" as other people are – we need to be as "good" as God intends for us to be.

We will never fulfill God's intention by following the status quo of American society in the early 21st century, which centers on wealth and pleasure. So how do we get to true goodness?

In the hero's journey, a universal template for literary narrative, a person becomes self-actualized by entering the abyss, or great dangers of life, knowing that the prize on the other side – material, spiritual, political, or emotional – is worth the risk-taking. Heroes are ordinary people who develop and use extraordinary courage, intelligence, love, faith, perseverance, etc. When I taught the model at the prison last week, I wanted to make it clear to those kids that they might be in the abyss now, but there was a way not just out but up toward their full potential.

Our faith lives are like that, too. A crucified Messiah can't help but call us to risk danger and loss when we act on our faith. There's a saying

that, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Let me tell you something – angels don’t fear anything. I’d say, “Faith rushes in where angels lead.” What are they telling you to do? Where are they telling you to go, physically, emotionally, spiritually? Are you even listening?

We might think that we’ve fulfilled God’s purpose when we defeat the demons in our spirits. But that’s only half the battle. We need to wrestle with the angels, too, and earn their blessing by doing what is right in God’s clear, great eyes that shine with love for that beautiful, bright young woman who committed murder -- and yes, even for us.

Amen.

CHILDREN’S TIME

What kinds of people live in prison, do you think? ...

Well, I’ve been in jail, and so have many of my heroes, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela, Saint Francis of Assisi, Joan of Arc, and the apostle Paul in the Bible. Oh, and Jesus Christ. We were all arrested for similar reasons – what do you think that might be? ...

Sometimes, people of faith speak and act for what they believe is right, and the earthly powers of government or business don’t agree. In those cases, who’s “bad” and who’s “good”? It’s not as easy to judge people as we sometimes think it is.

To be on the safe side, I think we should look at all people, even prisoners, the way God does – with compassionate love.

Let’s pray: Dear God, we ask that we always have the wisdom and the courage to follow your will wherever it leads us, and the love to be a blessing to everyone in your world. Amen.