

TEXT: 1 Kings 3:9; Matthew 13:44-50  
THEME: Evil dresses up in the guise of the good  
SUBJECT: Discerning between good and evil  
TITLE: Good and Evil

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
26 July 2020  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

The most remarkable commencement address I have read was delivered at Williams College in 1984. Williams was founded in 1793 and is located in Williamstown, Massachusetts. It has Oxford-style tutorials with a student to teacher ratio of 7-1. It is currently ranked as the #1 National Liberal Arts College.

Forbes Magazine printed “wise words” from the best commencement speeches of 2020. Oprah Winfrey began her speech on Facebook and Instagram, “You are the chosen class for such a time as this.” And concluded with, “Can you, the Class of 2020, show us how to create a new and more evolved normal, a world more just, kind, beautiful, tender, luminous, creative, whole?”

Bill and Melinda Gates published a commencement speech for the entire class of 2020: “You can use your voice and your vote to insist on policies that create a healthier, better future for everyone everywhere.”

Malala Yousafzai in a virtual commencement address said, “The world is yours now and I can’t wait to see what you make of it.”

In another virtual address, Stephen Spielberg advised, “A real dream is something that not only hangs on to you but you will hang onto it. And it will empower you through every obstacle that people and your environment will throw against you.”

Can you hear the cheers? Feel the enthusiasm? See the graduates running onto the field of life ready to create a “more perfect union”? This is the stuff we have come to expect of commencement addresses. After all, if you have paid more for your child’s education than you have for your house, you don’t want to hear anything but positive, inspiring encouragement!

Enter, stage left, Joseph Brodsky who was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972. He was a poet who taught at a number of American Universities and who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987. His commencement address at Williams College in 1984 began:

“Ladies and Gentleman of the Class of 1984: No matter how daring or cautious you may choose to be, in the course of your life you are bound to come into direct physical contact with what’s known as Evil.” Now that is an opening line!

He went on. “I mean . . . a palpable social reality that you in no way can control. No amount of good nature or cunning calculations will prevent the encounter. Such is the structure of life that what we regard as Evil is capable of fairly ubiquitous presence if only because it tends to appear in the guise of good. You never see it crossing your threshold announcing itself: ‘Hi, I’m Evil!’

“A prudent thing to do, therefore, would be to subject your notions of good to the closest possible scrutiny, to go, so to speak, through your entire wardrobe checking which of your clothes may fit a stranger. That, of course, may turn into a full-time occupation, and well it should. You’ll be surprised how many things you considered your own and good can easily fit, without much adjustment, your enemy. You may even start to wonder whether he is not your mirror image, for the most interesting thing about Evil is that it is wholly human.”

Solomon is famous for continually “checking his wardrobe.” When God offered Solomon whatever he wanted, Solomon asked for *a discerning mind*. Walter Brueggemann assures us a better translation of the phrase is *a hearing heart*. This request pleased God immensely. Most people ask for long life, wealth, the heads of their enemies.

Solomon desired a discerning mind/a hearing heart to know the difference between good and evil, something more valuable for good governance than the best military ever.

Joseph Brodsky was born and raised in Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union, a “union” held together by coercive power, a “union” where evil was called good and the good evil. Gaslighting was the coin of the realm.

It is out of this experience that Brodsky said to those bright young minds, “The reason I am talking to you about all this has nothing to do with you being young, fresh, facing a clean slate. No, the slate is dark with dirt and it is hard to believe in either your ability or your will to clean it.” Can’t you feel the hairs standing up on the back of the necks of the graduates and their parents?

If you pay only passing attention to what is happening in this country at the moment, you have to wonder about our ability and will to “clean the slate.” What have we done to address poverty, racism, the perversion of justice to benefit the privileged? We readily call evil good when evil shelters our interests.

In today’s gospel Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Jesus knows we are our deepest driving desire. If we uncover what we long for, we will discover who we are. Jesus continually challenges us to discern what we treasure above all else, to know what we are willing to sell to attain the pearl we value most.

When the disciples wanted to pull the weeds out of the field of wheat, Jesus warned against it because they could not discern the weeds from the wheat and even if they could, pulling the weeds would harm the wheat. In today's gospel, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a great net that hauled out of the sea fish of every kind, some good to eat some not.

Jesus assures the disciples that separating the wheat from the weeds, separating the good fish from the bad, is not their responsibility. It is the work of the angels at the end of time. According to Jesus, the slate will be cleaned only in the final judgment.

Josef Pieper, a German Catholic philosopher, considers the idea that we could ever bring about a world in which "man will cease to be the wolf of man and instead treat him in a manner befitting a human being" improbable.

In this life we are always "on the way," pilgrims. Because the fulfillment of the hope for heaven on earth lies beyond our ability to achieve, that gives us no right to regard the work as meaningless nor the right to deny the work's value.

What we have the ability to do, if we have the will to do it, is subject our notions of the good to the closest possible scrutiny. For as Joseph Brodsky warned those young graduates, "evil takes root when one man starts to think he is better than another."

PRAYER: St Ephraim of Syria (c.306-373) teacher and counselor to bishops.

“What Bides Waiting” translation by Scott Cairns

The fragrant air of Paradise returns  
the aged to their youth. Its scented  
breeze awakens in their wearied bodies  
the rising pulse of spring. In that land,  
all stain submerges to a sudden blush.

In the fallen face of Moses on that final mount,  
you might see the God has traced a parabolic icon  
of just what lies ahead; his ashen cheeks, scored  
by age and error, became luminous and fair.

All who wake to find themselves  
in Paradise awaken pure, for they  
have left all pettiness behind;  
no anger mars their faces,  
ferocity fallen clean away;  
they bear no mocking disposition,  
for scorn has fallen short.  
Because they do no harm,  
they do not harm themselves.

All past hatreds, envies, and regrets  
fail to figure in their thought.  
As new, renewing creatures, each  
beholds himself in glory,  
and in wonder walks beholding  
other beauties similarly walking.

The very nature of the body  
—once troubled and troubling—  
has quieted, resplendent  
outwardly in beauty, inwardly  
in innocence—the body in ways evident,  
the soul in hidden measure, ever so.