

Maundy Thursday

Then Satan entered into Judas, called Iscariot. The figure of Satan presents a bit of a quandary for 21st Century minds. We live in a much less enchanted world than the people of biblical times. For many of us, the idea of Satan as some sort of actual being is tough. Some reject the idea of Satan altogether; others are pretty set with the idea that Satan is a literal being of some sort.

Either way we need something that explains massive evil that is greater than any one person. So I actually find Satan a helpful image for that. Satan is the power that lies behind evil. We first met Satan, or the devil, in the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Satan was forced to retreat then, but has been waiting for an opportune time. That time has come.

Satan will once again confront Jesus, this time through Judas.

Our first reading for this evening comes from one of Paul's letters. Paul sometimes uses the title Satan, but he more often does not personify the force of evil behind people's actions. Instead, he talks about the principalities and powers, or the prince of the power of the air...the spiritual forces of evil that influence the world...

Modern day theologians have used other terms. The domination system is a term coined by theologian Walter Wink. It's a system of oppression that seeks to concentrate power in a small group of people and excludes or oppresses others. It's a system that takes on a life of its own – it essentially becomes a spiritual force.

The domination system acts wherever we see an oppressive government, like the Roman empire. It is also in operation in religious institutions that are built on hierarchy and control of people – institutions that act in concert with oppressive government, like The Temple in Jerusalem. In the domination system, wealth also tends to be concentrated in a small number of people who determine how wealth will be distributed.

That domination system is a zero-sum game where there are only winners and losers – and if you get something, it means I'll lose something.

Other scholars have called this the sin system. Whatever term you use – Satan or spiritual forces of evil or some sort of sin system, it's a way to understand evil that goes far beyond one person's actions.

The last part of tonight's reading actually captures it pretty well – the disciples argued about who is the greatest. Jesus turns that completely upside down.

When the gospels tell us that Satan entered Judas, it tells us that the passion story is not just a conflict between the Temple officials and the Roman government versus a man who will be convicted as a rebel. This is a battle with the cosmic powers of evil.

The problem is, those powers often appear deceptively good. Rome offered safety and security. It had a booming economy. A powerful military. And the Temple was, well, the Temple. The power of Satan, or the domination system seduces people – it's a system of idolatry that in those days made the Emperor a god.

We don't really know Judas' personal motive. John's gospel implies it was about money in part. But what the gospels make clear is that the force behind Judas's action, by whatever name we call it, was far beyond just Judas.

Violence, retaliation, revenge, hate – all those are a part of the domination system. Violence as a solution to the problem of evil has resulted in a vicious cycle of violence and retaliation, that has repeated itself since the beginning of human history.

Jesus clearly knew that Satan had a grip on Judas. He knew what Judas was going to do. Although it's Judas Satan has hold of, in reality, this is another temptation for Jesus. The temptation to fight back.

Yielding to that temptation would have had Jesus get the disciples to stop Judas – chain him up, threaten him, maybe even kill him. Jesus will face other similar temptations as the story progresses. But he will not yield – he will not buy into Satan's sin system.

So what does Jesus do instead? He gathers them all around the table...the one he knows will betray him, the one he knows will deny him, the ones who will all yield to fear of the power of Satan. They share a meal and some wine. He takes bread, blesses it and says this is my body given for you.

Then after supper, he takes the cup of wine – wine that symbolized the blood of the Passover lamb, which freed the Israelites from the domination system of Egypt. With that wine, he made a new covenant – this is my blood, poured out for your freedom.

In this outpouring of himself, he broke the sin system. It's in Jesus' death and resurrection that Satan is finally defeated. But that victory begins right here.

Tonight, we too gather around his table. I'm going to take you back for a minute to the vision of the heavenly banquet we talked about on Ash Wednesday.

There's a large gathering of all sorts of people...brown, black, and white. Queer and straight. There are rich and poor, young, old and in between.

There's a black rapper and a punk rocker and a white country star. There are people in wheelchairs and those carrying white canes. There's a high-ranking government official whose policies have struck fear in some of the people, especially the most vulnerable.

There's a woman who shares a social media meme that says I'm not ashamed to be a follower of Jesus – share if you're not either.

But some of her other posts are hateful anti-immigrant and even racist posts. There are urban gang members and Christian nationalists and neo-Nazis. There are Republicans and Democrats and Independents. There are farmers and factory workers, pipefitters and health care workers and corporate CEOs.

Some gathered think to themselves “that guy doesn't belong here. He's dangerous.” Or “do I really have to be in the room with these people?” Others are carrying a load of guilt and shame and can't imagine why they've been invited.

Some think, if Jesus really knew what those people were like, he never would have invited them.

We are there, too. We're there with all our personal failures and missteps...our guilt and our shame...our ego and resentments. We're there often not even recognizing how we are complicit in this sin system – complicit in a system that tempts us to see some people as better than others, and to celebrate violence done to those we think deserve it. Complicit in a system that is a constant fight over who is the greatest and who deserves what.

As Jesus gathers everyone around the table, a quiet falls. He takes the bread in his hands, breaks it, and says this is my body, given for you.

Then he takes the cup and says – this wine is my blood – poured out for you to free you from the grasp of Satan's power.

Jesus breaks the sin system...he breaks the domination system...he breaks the power of Satan, with self-giving love.

It may be hard for us to see how this bread and wine...this shared meal...this love shown to everyone...can truly defeat the forces of evil.

Tonight is called Maundy Thursday – Maundy comes from the same Latin word from which we get mandate, or commandment. It's so named because of Jesus' commandment from John's gospel – love one another as I have loved you.

Love may not seem to us to be powerful enough. We may doubt the power of love to stop evil. But truly, it is the only thing that ever will.