

WHO'S YOUR GOBLIN?

--Today is Reformation Sunday. As excited as I know you must be by such an important celebration as this, you are probably spending a bit more time and energy focused on the occasion of "trick or treat." You know-- what night is it, what are the hours for it, and will we have enough candy on hand to dole out in the course of it?

When I was a kid out doing my "Halloween-ing," as we called it, one visited the houses of all the local family and of all the neighbors that one knew. Then, costumed and masked, we would stand on front porches, as those whose doors we knocked on went through the ritual of actually guessing who we were, before awarding us some treat--an apple, a candy bar, or even a quarter or two. Now, at least in my neighborhood, they practically bus the kids in from who knows where, as they roam from house to house of perfect strangers, simply opening their bags to receive whatever candy is being given out, before running on to the next property which happens to have left on the front porch light.

Halloween isn't what Halloween was. Halloweens then and now, however, do have in common the getting dressed up as some character or other. Among those who ring my door bell these days, there are, of course, fairy princesses, cheerleaders, and football players. And, then and now, among these innocent-enough looking figures, there is a good cross-section of all sorts of villains and ghosts and monsters, putting us squarely in the territory of this morning's reading from the gospel of Luke.

If we engage our imaginations even a little, we are bound to experience this scene from the gospel as a scary one: Jesus confronted by a wild-eyed, naked man who suddenly appears from among the local tombs, where bizarrely he has made his home. Obviously out of his mind, the fellow is definitely an attention-grabber-- possessed by demons, it is said, malevolent spirits which afford him a sort of super-human power with which even to break chains that the threatened locals use to bind him, uncivilized spirits which drive him out into the wilderness where he wanders among the wild things, doing only heaven knows what out there.

In short, he is associated with death, with unpredictable behaviors, and with uncontrollable appetites--just the sort of elements that, even in our own day, make for a really good "spooky movie." Are you listening, Stephen King or M. Night Shyamalan?

--If we just relegate this scenario to the dustbin of Bible stories that have no relevance in our contemporary worlds, then we dramatically reduce the amount of insight that we have into ourselves.

The uncomfortable truth is, speaking psychologically, speaking spiritually, there is a sort of demoniac inside each of us. Within us all there is an assortment of bothersome, even pernicious, dark spirits who, with alarming ease, can gain access to our conscious worlds. Any one of these can periodically take possession of us at the oddest times and manifest itself in sometimes the awfulest ways.

Oh, at such moments, we may not literally tear off all our clothing and start moving our things into the cemetery, but in our own ways we will be every bit as affected as that demoniac is depicted in the country of the Gerasenes. In short, at the symbolical level, this old tale is about the inner life of every person. It is about the frightening potential that each of us has for unleashing the worst that we carry within us.

These are the very things that we obliquely perceive in the books and movies that we use to scare ourselves, from the hauntings of houses, to creatures that live on the lifeblood of humans, to the dead that cannot be killed--all images of the sometimes bewitching and bedeviling inner lives of human beings.

--In a word, truly, goblins abound.

- Maybe you're vulnerable to the gripping goblin. Those who are almost always see the half-empty quality to life. Something is always wrong, always missing, always in short supply, always foul, always less than desirable. That translates itself into a life of constant criticizing and grumbling and complaining.
- Or maybe it's the gossiping goblin which has your ear, which is always close to the ground to pick up some latest juicy tidbit about someone else's life. This one is firmly convinced that the more dirt that can be discovered and passed along to a third party who is imbued with the same goblin, the better. The investment of all the continuing hostile scrutiny of everyone else's lives means that one's own life can continue unexamined--quite the payoff, don't you think?
- I know. How about the greedy goblin? That's a good one, too. When living under the influence of this goblin, life is all about acquiring, accumulating, hoarding. It's about getting all of some coveted thing for oneself that one can manage; it's about keeping it away from others, despite any deprivation to them that might occur, even when what one already has far exceeds what is reasonable or practical. For the greedy goblin, there simply is no such thing as enough.
- Then, too, there's the grudge-bearing goblin. That one is a real winner, capable of taking even the smallest slight or offense and magnifying it into something of such aggravating proportion and compelling importance that, even for years afterwards, the grievance gets dragged around like some old, dry skeleton, the twisted purpose being to keep the imagined wounding fresh and to keep oneself all stirred up. All the while, it goes on spitting out the sort of venom intended for another that not infrequently only poisons oneself.

--As you can plainly hear, then, goblins do indeed abound. These four are merely the smallest tip of the diabolical iceberg floating along in the waters of the human soul.

There is nobody who lacks a pet goblin or two. It is only ever a question of which one is the one that has adopted us and taken up quarters within us. Whatever the preference, when possessed by one or another of these inner goblins, we have quite simply lost our minds, in our own ways possessed, to a greater or lesser degree, by the malevolent and the uncivilized.

To repeat, at the symbolical level, this old tale of the Gerasene demoniac is about the frightening potential that each of us has for unleashing the worst that we carry within us.

It is about the desperate need for the activity of a different set of spirits, which in the story is evident in the world that Jesus represents. That world, thank heaven, is also within us, awaiting our choosing of it.

Jesus exorcises the man of his devils, and he is released. Confronted by light, it appears, darkness flees. And, the account reads, "They found the man from whom the demons had gone . . . clothed and in his right mind" (8.35a).

In this age of unmanaged anger and meanness and contentiousness, it is good that someone remain in his or her "right mind."

So, who's your goblin?

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