

In the 1600's, Salem, Massachusetts was divided into a prosperous town—second only to Boston—and a farming village. The two communities did not get along. The villagers, in turn, were split into factions that fiercely debated whether to start their own church and their own government separate from the town. In 1689 the villagers won the right to establish their own church.

Reverend Samuel Parris, a former merchant, was chosen as their minister. His rigid ways and seemingly boundless demands for compensation—including personal title to the village parsonage—increased the friction. Many villagers vowed to drive Parris out, and they stopped contributing to his salary in October 1691.

Seeking release from the tension choking their family, Parris's nine-year-old daughter, Betty, and her cousin Abigail Williams delighted in the mesmerizing tales spun by Tituba, a slave from Barbados. The girls invited several friends to share this delicious, forbidden diversion. Tituba's audience listened intently as she talked of telling the future.

Life in the community changed, however, in February 1692. Betty Parris began having "fitts" that defied all explanation. So did Abigail Williams and the girls' friend Ann Putnam. Doctors and ministers watched in horror as the girls contorted themselves, cowered under chairs, and shouted nonsense. The girls' agonies "could not possibly be Dissembled," declared the Reverend Cotton Mather, one of the brightest stars in the Massachusetts firmament.

Lacking a natural explanation, the Puritans turned to the supernatural—the girls must be witches. Prodded by Parris and others, they named their tormentors: a disheveled beggar named Sarah Good, the elderly Sarah Osburn, and Tituba herself. Each woman was something of a misfit. Osburn claimed innocence. Good did likewise but fingered Osburn. Tituba, her recollection refreshed by Parris confessed—and then some.

“The devil came to me and bid me serve him,” Tituba reported in March 1692. Villagers sat spellbound as Tituba spoke of black dogs, red cats, yellow birds, and a white-haired man who bade her sign the devil’s book. There were several undiscovered witches, she said, and they yearned to destroy the Puritans.

Finding witches became a crusade—not only for Salem but all Massachusetts. Before long the crusade turned into a convulsion, and the witch-hunters ultimately proved far more deadly than their prey.

This story and the story from the gospel of Mark this morning begs me to ask the question. Which is worse? The presence of evil in the world or the fear of evil in the world which causes people to act in evil ways?

We peek into the gospel of Mark this morning in the 3rd chapter. This chapter contains several stories or references to Jesus healing people. But rather than become excited by the healing that Jesus does, the people around Jesus become fearful.

In the first part of chapter 3, Jesus encounters a man with a withered hand. He discovers this man on the Sabbath. Before healing him, Jesus asks the crowd, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill it?” The crowd is silent. Jesus heals.

The crowd then conspires how to destroy Jesus. Jesus continues to heal. The unclean spirits fall down before Jesus and proclaim him to be the Son of God. The “good, righteous people?” They conspire to kill him.

Jesus' family hears about the healing that Jesus is doing. They think he has gone mad. "Stop it," they tell Jesus. Jesus keeps healing. But rather than celebrate the healing that Jesus is doing and the power over evil that Jesus displays, the crowd of religious folk accuse Jesus of being a tool of Satan. Yes, Jesus Christ, the son of God, is accused by religious folks of being a tool of Satan.

Let me say that I believe that evil is a very real power and presence in the world. You can call it whatever you want to call it. You can refer to evil as Satan, demonic forces, evil, whatever. The Bible and human history is clear that evil is very real and a very real danger. From Salem witch trials, to the rise of Nazism, to genocide in Rwanda and other places, to the killings and other acts of violence today of innocent people, we know that evil is very real in the world and must be fought against.

But this story from the life of Jesus shows very clearly that evil is never as strong as the power of God. When confronted with evil or demonic forces or Satan, Jesus always wins. Jesus never loses. Our favorite team or player may lose, but Jesus never does. He is always victorious over evil. And that is the case in this story. Jesus wins over evil.

Human beings are quick to denounce things we don't understand as being evil. The Salem witch trials are a clear example of this. But it is also true that people that look different or act different we are quick to denounce as evil.

I want to share a story that I think could have turned out very different than the way it turned out. The way this story has evolved is rooted in how someone looked at a situation and could have seen it as a place to root out evil or as a place to encourage the good.

In 1996, Sally Wylde and Louise Jackson, both residents of Decatur, Georgia's Oakhurst neighborhood, had a life-changing conversation. Neither of them had any idea that one little nuisance would transform their community. What they knew was that every afternoon, children leaving the nearby elementary school cut through Mrs. Jackson's yard and trampled her beloved garden.

A single decision, however, made all the difference. Rather than describing these kids as evil and involving the police, Sally and Mrs. Jackson partnered with a group of neighbors to invite the children to become caretakers of the garden. Working together, they restored Mrs. Jackson's garden and added a beautiful, hand-painted fence. The children watched with delight and amazement as their plantings took root and flourished, and something ordinary turned into something special -- a process they had never noticed or understood before.

With their newfound enthusiasm and knowledge, the group moved on to create a garden in the median strip of the street in front of Mrs. Jackson's house. The children took tremendous pride in their work, which was honored at a ceremony with the city's mayor, who presented each child with a certificate of appreciation. Faster than kudzu, word spread about how much fun it was to dig and plant, and suddenly, more children were lining up to work in Mrs. Jackson's garden.

The following year, a nearby, undeveloped half-acre lot became available. The property, which had been used as a commercial basil farm, was at risk for development in the rapidly gentrifying Oakhurst community of Decatur. Instead, Sally and her husband, Britt Dean, acquired it, and the Oakhurst Community Garden Project was born. Through her enthusiasm, creative spirit, and a mission to create a space where children could come for hands-on environmental education, Sally encouraged a decade's worth of youth who are our next generation of environmental stewards.

We can look at the world around us as a place to fear and respond out of that fear. Or we can look at the world around us as a place where God is at work doing good things and wants us to help nurture the good in our community and in our world. As we contemplate how to view the possibilities we need to be reminded that God always wins over evil. AMEN.

-Opening story from National Geographic and found at
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/salem/>

-Oakhurst Community Garden story found at
http://www.oakhurstgarden.org/about_02.html

-Text: Mark 3:30-20

-Given: July 19, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)