



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Way Out: Good and Evil

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Of course this is the weekend we remember Martin Luther King Jr. A force for good against the evil of racism. Good – King. Evil – Bull Connor. Good – Ghandi. Evil – Mao. Good – Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Evil – Hitler. Good – Susan B. Anthony. Evil – the Taliban. Good – Dudley Do-Right. Evil – Snidely Whiplash. Good – Myrna Loy. Evil – Joan Crawford [not really]. Forrest Gump – good. Hannibal Lector – evil. We all have our hall of fame and shame. But, be careful of dualisms, of opposites, of easy categories.

Every sermon has a beginning in something, or somewhere, and most of them have multiple beginnings. This one has roots way back – in 1966, in Appleton, WI, on a cool and gray late fall day. It also has its roots last summer, when a member of the church emailed me about the shootings that occurred in Norway, when a young man, an evangelical Christian, killed 77 people, the majority of them teenagers and young adults, and I was asked about forgiveness and if that might be possible in such a case. It has its roots in stories this week about the killing of four homeless men in Orange County. What kind of world is this? It has its roots in the John Howard Pavilion for the criminally insane at St Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington DC, the federal psychiatric hospital. It has its roots in my own heart.

Good and evil. It's an old story. The Bible's second creation story begins with it, [for those of you who get into arguments about the Bible with others, remind yourselves that the Bible begins with two variations of the creation] with Adam and Eve being told they should not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But of course they do, and so they are kicked out of paradise – like being exiled from Pasadena to Bakersfield. Eating the fruit has given them wisdom, the Bible says, and with that comes the experience of shame [this is really a curious story], and so they are kicked out, and cursed, and condemned to a life of hardship and pain.

So much for mercy or for the value of education. The knowledge of good and evil brings sorrow, but makes us like the Gods. Apparently the Gods [the plural is used in this story, as though there were multiple Gods and not just one] know shame as well, and must wear clothes and also live a life of hardship and pain. That is the logic – the only thing is that they don't die, so I guess the pain is eternal. As I said – this is one curious story.

Good and evil. Biblical scholars assert that good and evil in this context means everything; it means that in the Fall - I guess the fall from innocence - humans understand the nature of existence; they acquire wisdom – that life is hard and filled with toil and that there is no paradise. And this we know is true – even in Pasadena.

And, as you know, this is followed by the story of Cain and Abel, and the first murder. Cain and Abel both offer sacrifices to God, but God prefers Abel's – no reason is given. Cain kills Abel and is confronted by God who says 'What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground.'

Cain's punishment is exile, to be sent into the wilderness, separated and away from others, and Cain says that is a punishment more than he can bear.

Good and evil; it the age old question. In most religions, good and evil are matters of knowledge and ignorance, or of obedience and disobedience, of just being in the nature of things, of mercy and terror. Typically, eastern religions think of good and evil in terms of knowledge and ignorance and western religions in terms of obedience and disobedience.

Here is my story. In Appleton, WI, in 1966, I was a sophomore at Lawrence University. Lawrence sits on a bluff above the Fox River that runs north from Lake Winnebago into Lake Michigan. There were trails and train tracks – the Fox River Valley was the center of the paper industry in the US for some time, lots of eroded banks, caves and tangles of brush and detritus.

I took a walk one day, in the deep melancholy of sophomore blues, walked across an old railway trestle and towards a cave in the bluff. There was a big rock there, covered in graffiti – lots of students had sat there doing lots of things, but I wanted to contemplate the meaning of it all and my place in the scheme of things. I lit a Camel – and sat for a minute or two, smoking and contemplating my woes, when I sensed something near me, behind me, something too close. I turned around and there was nothing there but there was something there, and what was there was not kind or gentle.

It was the man in the black suit in Stephen King's story. A presence, a sense of evil, of darkness, of all that was not good. It scared me – deeply – and I hustled back to my dorm, shaking. I never told anyone about it – it was crazy of course, a goofy figment of an adolescent imagination; it was the indulgence of young melancholia.

Or was it? I still do not know.

Is evil real? Does the devil exist? And if the devil exists, does that mean there is some good angel that exists, too? Is there something built into the very nature of existence that is evil, or good for that matter? Is the devil out there or in me?

Andrew Delbanco teaches American cultural studies at Columbia and a few years back wrote a book 'The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil.' It is an excellent book and Delbanco is an extremely insightful thinker [his first book was about William Ellery Channing and his last was a biography of Melville – how can you miss?] His argument is that we have lived in the most brutal century in human history – what with two world wars, the holocaust, the astonishing civil wars in the Congo, Rwanda and Somalia, the brutality of Stalin and Mao, the Khmer Rouge and the killing fields of Cambodia, the Balkan wars and Serbian atrocities. Darfur and Abu Ghraib – the list can go on and on. And he claims that we are losing our ability to talk and think about evil. This is a problem he thinks.

Delbanco says that we have typically considered evil in two ways – one as external to us – the other. This is typically the way more fundamentalist thinkers – of both the right and the left – imagine evil – Reagan's 'evil empire' or George Bush's Axis of Evil. This is the devil of the Puritans and the Salem witch trials; it is the gay agenda, the communists in the State Department, the hippies, or, it is the capitalists, Wall Street bankers, the Tea party etc. Evil is other – the man in the black suit.

The other way we have thought of evil is as privation – an absence. Evil is emptiness. This is Emerson. It is the lack of feeling or the lack of the use of reason, the lack of empathy, the lack of right thinking and so on. Evil comes about because of illness or ignorance; it is not so much a real presence as it is the lack of something. The tragedy in Norway is due to mental illness, the lack of sanity. A privation of something. What is whole is good, this theory goes, what is not tends to evil.

There are problems in both of these views. To externalize evil is, well, the first step to creating the 'other', to seeing the fault in others rather than in our selves. It leads to demonizing. The problem with evil as privation is that it ignores that there may be real evil in the world – there was something there in Appleton.

Remember this scene in 'Silence of the Lambs'? Hannibal Lector says to Officer Starling, who is trying to understand how he became who he is [note the names: Hannibal – the great general who used elephants and Starling – a small and somewhat unimportant bird]:

'Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences. You've given up good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling. You've got everybody in moral dignity pants – nothing is ever anybody's fault. Look at me Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I'm evil?'

Stephen Pinker, the Harvard cognitive psychologist, believes, contra Delbanco, that we are living in the most peaceful time in human history [Pinker is a Canadian so of course he is nicer], that in spite of the wars

of the last 100 years, fewer people die through warfare, as a percentage of the population than ever. Murder rates are down all over the world. Violence against women, while still significant, has declined, as has violence against children. The UN did produce a Universal declaration of human rights. And there is the Geneva Convention on treatment of persons during war.

Pinker claims that this is due, at least in part, to the ascendancy of reason in human affairs and of science, and, by implication, the decline of faith and belief. Evil, in his view, is privation – much as has been true for most of the religions of the east – Hinduism and Taoism and Buddhism – a matter of ignorance.

So what do you think? Is there some actual evil force afoot? If you believe in a God of any definition that has to do with the Good, then why not the devil, too? How do we understand evil – that seems to be the issue more than understand the good, I think. That we struggle with this is, I think, one of the reasons behind the popularity of the vampire and zombie movement. Delbanco is at least partly right – we have great difficulty in talking about evil. Those movies and shows about vampires and zombies are obviously morality plays – good and evil, and, in a twist, some of what was always considered evil is not. There are good vampires and werewolves, I understand. Not sure about good zombies yet. That there is difficulty is not necessarily bad – this is complex after all.

What do I mean by evil? Evil is essentially this: the willed suffering to another living creature. Recently a leopard in India ate an attorney but we don't think of that as evil. Great white sharks are fearsome, very fearsome, but not evil. Our cats toy with small creatures until they die – that is not evil [well, ok, maybe cats are].

Evil belongs to humans, and it is the willed suffering on another living creature – not just to humans, but to most living creatures. Enjoying suffering, willing suffering for your own ends – that is what evil is.

I want to go back to Appleton and the man in the black suit of my sophomore year. We gather here each week for many reasons, but we are here for a primary purpose – that is to become better persons and that while we certainly do try and understand the world, our faith is seen more in how we act than in how we think – Jefferson said our religion should be read in our deeds rather in our words.

And so in terms of good and evil, the way out is less to theorize than to do the good. The way out, as the title of this sermon suggests is not to eliminate evil but to eliminate suffering.

The man in the black suit, the one who visited me in Appleton, is no more than myself, the ability I have, that we all have, to inflict suffering on others; evil is within all of our grasps. And we are right to be afraid of that black suit that hides within us all. Like Hannibal Lector says 'I happened.' I am responsible for myself.

Here I want to make my point, and I will return to this over the next number of sermons. We are all mixes of the ability to do good and the ability to do evil. Some people are indeed driven by demons they cannot control – sometimes it is the violence of their own history; sometimes the misfiring in their own minds – sometimes there are causes of evil, and for those we need to have understanding and even sympathy. All of the troubles of those who come back from war, or suffer abuse – that is real.

But sometimes, it is just us. Remember what Martin Luther King said? The more we are separated from our own selves, the more we are separated from others, the more we are separated from the world as a whole, the more that man in the black suit can appear. Separated from ourselves, our hearts become closed; separated from others, our hands close into fists. Connected, our hearts and our hands, our minds can be open. Open hearts, open minds, open hands – this is how we move towards eliminating suffering. Not always eliminating evil, but at least working to eliminate suffering.

This is King's message – sin is separation he said; segregation was a willful separation and so a sin, and thus evil. Denying same sex marriage is a separation. That is sinful. Denying global warming is separation; ignoring income inequality is separation; denying the increase in poverty is separation. This is where the man in the black suit lives and gains power – in separation. This is why communities matter; why we matter, why we must connect with our own selves and with those around us, with the human world and the natural world.

Life or death, either or, both and. I'll choose life, and life and both and the goodness of an open heart and an open mind. It's the way out.

Amen