

MARCH THEME - EVIL
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
MARCH 9, 2014

OPENING WORDS

Morning (#438) ~ Clinton Lee Scott

From the east comes the sun, bringing a new and unspoiled day.
It has already circled the earth and looked upon distant lands and far-away peoples.
It has passed over mountain ranges and the waters of the seven seas.
It has shone upon laborers in the fields, into the windows of homes, and shops, and factories.
It has beheld proud cities with gleaming towers, and also the hovels of the poor.
It has been witness to both good and evil, the works of honest men and women and the conspiracy of knaves.
It has seen marching armies, bomb-blasted villages and "the destruction that wasteth at noonday."
Now, unsullied from its tireless journey, it comes to us, messenger of the morning, Harbinger of a new day.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Extra Yarn ~Mac Barnett

Annabelle finds a box filled with an endless supply of coloured yarn. She knits joy and beauty all over the town...until the box is stolen by an evil archduke.

READING

Can UUs Talk about Evil? ~ Rev. Angela Herrera

This reading comes from an article published in the UUWorld magazine. Written 10 years after the events of 9/11, it reflected on the question, "Can UUs talk about evil?"

A spiritual value closely related to open-mindedness, but deeper and harder to practice, is spiritual humility.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust and World War II, in response to liberal religion's inflated estimation of human nature, Reinhold Niebuhr [a progressive Christian theologian] argued that the problem with people is the tension between our creaturely and divine sides. We are animals, but we are conscious and spiritual. The problem, he argued, is that we consistently overestimate ourselves. This leads us to harm one another and to create, support, or not resist systems of oppression.

If we are spiritually humble, we can call out evil without pretending we don't have to be on guard for it within ourselves. []

This is where religious liberalism, even though it has underestimated humankind's capacity for evil in the past, has something important to say about evil. We are called to balance the naming of evil in the world with the need to be humble and on guard for

it—not as the dangerous ‘other’ that would try to trick us, but mingled right here with the best of ourselves.

And we must call it when we see it. If we are in touch with reality, we must be willing to use the word evil. We need the word evil to describe parts of the human experience—out of respect for the people who are harmed, and also because only after we name it can we ask the theological question: Where is God or Grace in this?

And then, if we listen, we’ll hear the answer—because it’s implicit in the next question: What can we do?

MESSAGE

The Canadian Unitarian Council's Annual Conference and Meeting (the CUC-ACM) is being held in Montreal this year, and as usual is on the May long weekend...May 16-18. On the Saturday, UUMOC (the UU Ministers of Canada) is sponsoring a workshop on Theme-Based Ministry, a workshop to be presented by Rev. Scott Tayler, the Director of Congregational Life for the Unitarian Universalist Association, and one of the foremost experts on this model...this theme-based ministry stuff. I'd LOVE it if all of you could attend that workshop!

The brochure about the workshop says that theme-based ministry allows us to engage on particular themes at a deep level - asking how each theme affects our lives, and allowing for a diversity of perspectives - and in so doing builds bridges within our community. I believe that. I've been watching this happen over the two plus years that we've engaged in some practice of theme-based ministry. It's a good thing.

Still, if you feel that blame must be placed somewhere, you can blame 'theme-based ministry' for today's topic: evil. I have no doubt that if we weren't using the theme-based ministry model, I would not have tackled evil as a sermon topic.

Each month our covenant groups have the option of using the congregational theme as their discussion topic, and in preparation the covenant group facilitators discuss that theme a month ahead. So, early in February, the facilitators tried to discuss evil...and didn't have a very fruitful go if it, so we decided not to suggest it to the individual groups. In retrospect, that experience presents a perfect microcosm for how we deal with evil, and why I believe it's important for us to confront the topic...we don't seem to have a working definition for evil, we aren't prepared to name anything or anyone as evil (even when we have been personally and directly affected by it in our lives), and we are even more reluctant to identify anything within us, or anything we have ever done, as evil. This was true of the gathered facilitators, and it's also true of me. I don't really want to think about, or talk about, evil.

So, why are we doing it today?

I love this faith. And because I love it so, I do not take lightly aspersions that are thrown our way. Some of those aspersions come from the outside...from those who actually view us as

evil because of what we hold to be of value. I can mostly dismiss those comments because I understand how very differently we view the world...but I also try to remind myself to be humble enough to see if there's anything to learn from what they have to say.

What is of greater concern are such aspersions that come from the inside...from people who also love and care about this faith and liberal religion...people who would warn us that unless we can grapple with evil, we will be ineffectual in any efforts to create change.

In 1913, even before the terrible tragedies of World War I, Unitarian minister and Harvard Divinity School professor William Wallace Fenn wrote:

“Turning now to the criticism of Liberalism from within [], we must seriously question whether it can bear the weight of the tragedies of human existence. Does not its amiable faith in inherent goodness appear ghastly mockery when confronted by the facts of life?”

The daughter of the great Unitarian religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs — once criticized her own [] religious education for failing to address the reality of evil.

"We spent 95 percent of our time studying good people doing good things, and skipped very lightly over the bad parts of humanity," she said []. "I was taught not to be judgmental, not to observe or report on the bad behavior of others. Consequently, [] I grew up ignorant about bad human behavior, incompetent to observe it accurately, unskilled in how to respond to it, and ashamed of talking about evil."¹

Is our faith in inherent goodness a mockery? Are we unable to respond to evil because we're ill-equipped to talk about it? I take these concerns seriously, and so I invite you into this grappling session with me...with the disclaimer that I can't possibly adequately address this topic in one little sermon. I'm not even touching the question about what the existence of evil might imply about the nature of God or the nature of humanity. Still, let's begin.

First of all, we must define evil, or at least find a definition that serves us. There's no point in turning to the dictionary here...we must find a more nuanced, more meaningful understanding than any dictionary can offer.

In his book "The Source of Human Good," philosopher and theologian Henry Nelson Wieman wrote:

"Evil is not negative in the sense of being the mere absence of good; for particular instances of evil are powerful and aggressive. But there is no general principle which characterizes all instances of evil except the negative principle of being opposed to the good. ...evil is a definite and specifiable character of events; it is what obstructs or destroys the good."²

¹ <http://www.uuworld.org/2002/01/feature1.html>

² Wieman, Henry N., *The Source of Human Good* (Scolars Press: Atlanta, 1995) pp 84-85.

Liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr characterized evil as more of an attitude than a force, saying that "Evil is always the assertion of some interest without regard to the whole, whether the whole be conceived as the immediate community, or the total community of humanity, or the total order of the world."

In a similar vein, the Rev. Dr. Thandeka, formerly a theologian at Meadville Lombard Theological School, defines evil as "the failure to understand the inherent worth and dignity of every person as part of the interdependent web of all existence." Each person of the web.³

Her definition is not far from that of Lee Thorn, a Vietnam veteran struggling with PTSD. He says that it was what he saw in the bombing of Haiphong that was a turning point, and which led to his definition of evil as "any abstraction that enables you to look at someone and not see the person."⁴

That's like Rev. Dr. Davidson Loehr, who defines evil as constricting life into too small a vision, of treating people like things.⁵

Rev. Dr. Paul Razor sees evil as that which destroys life or that prevents or inhibits life from flourishing. He believes it must be addressed on two levels...where it operates within social structures and also where it has been internalized...where it has "killed the soul," making the struggle against evil both justice work, and spiritual work.⁶

Rev. Bill Schultz, out of his work with Amnesty International where he witnessed the realities of torture, speaks of an 8th deadly sin, which he believes trumps all the other seven: cruelty. He identifies cruelty as that which makes the world less radiant...that which erects roadblocks to blessings, and makes what is gracious about life far harder to see. I don't know that he directly equates cruelty with evil, yet his definition of cruelty is not unlike these other definitions of evil.⁷

Do any, or all, of those definitions resonate with you? These theologians and scholars have all seen it necessary to grapple with this...to find working definitions that they hope will help us better respond to evil. For now, my working definition of evil is this...Evil is anything that works to destroy the creative and healing power of love, or which seeks to inhibit the flourishing of life and beauty. In our human action, there is great potential for evil when we close our eyes to others and make them into things. And, when evil becomes imbedded in societal structures and practices, it can become an aggressive and active force that permeates all like a cancer. How's that for a start?

³ <http://www.uuworld.org/2002/01/feature1.html>

⁴ <http://godsfriends.org/Vol8/No1/ComingBack.html>

⁵ <http://www.uuworld.org/2002/01/feature1.html>

⁶ <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2001/fulfillingpromise/128725.shtml>

⁷ <http://www.firstuuwilm.org/documents/The8thDEADLYSIN.pdf>

The struggle between good and evil is central to so much of our literature, our mythologies, our stories. Don't we love a good movie...be it science fiction or action/adventure or an epic tale...where the forces of good and evil battle? And don't we cheer and hurrah when good conquers evil? How can we explain this if on some level we don't 'know' the potential for evil ...in us and around us? Maybe what is true is that we can't box evil into one definition, any more that we can define goodness or God. Still, we know it when we see it...that is, if we allow ourselves to see it.

One of the aforementioned aspersions about Unitarian Universalism would characterize us as people who can live in denial of evil...that we build middle-class castles where we can believe whatever we want and where we hang out to just have fun. "No, no, no," we say, "we want to act for justice and change the world!" And this is just the place where I want to insert....insist...that unless we can name evil, unless we can identify what it is that we want to change, within and without, we will be unable to do so.

Over seventy years ago James Luther Adams, the most renowned Unitarian theologian of the twentieth century, delivered a Berry Street Lecture which has been called a turning point in the liberal religious understanding of human nature. (In honour of International Women's Day, I chose to edit his language.)

The liberal, Adams said,

"...cannot correct *zür* "too jocund" [blithe] view of life until *ze* recognizes that there is in human nature a deep-seated and universal tendency . . . to ignore the demands of mutuality and thus to waste freedom or abuse it by devotion to the idols of the tribe. . . . It cannot be denied that religious liberalism has neglected these aspects of human nature in its zeal to proclaim the spark of divinity in *each person*. We may call these tendencies by any name we wish but we do not escape their destructive influence by a conspiracy of silence concerning them."

We cannot be silent about the destructive influence of evil. Not if we want to affect change in the world. Not if we want to "confront the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love."⁸

Powers and structures of evil. The powers and principalities of the world. And, the evil within.

Most of you know that I was raised in a fundamentalist home, so I was taught that evil is a force, an essence, incarnate in the 'person' of Satan. The devil had as much chance to influence me as did Jesus or God, so I was taught to be on constant guard. Now, I've since rejected such notions of evil as a separate entity with agency in the world, just as I've rejected such notions of god. And to compensate, I've spent many years looking for, believing in, that spark of divinity in me, and in others.

⁸ from UU's second source

But now, today, when it comes to evil, I find much truth in the words of Rev. Herrera read earlier by Jovanna, and in this quote from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn:

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of *zir* own heart?”⁹

We are capable of both good and evil. We are, each of us, capable of love and hate, able to create or to destroy, to use our powers to bless or to curse. We are consistently if not constantly engaged in a struggle between good and evil. Acknowledging this makes it possible for us to name evil when we see it, to work to counteract it, and to do so with humility and courage.

There is a spark of divinity in each of us. Each of us has the potential for worthiness and dignity. And, each of us can choose to try to snuff out those sparks, and to steal from others every opportunity for grace. Blessedly, each of us also has the potential to reach into that bottomless box of goodness, filled with every colour of love, and from it to knit ad infinitum, to create beauty and hope in the world.¹⁰ Just so, each of us can act 'as if' every person possesses a shining radiance that must be honoured and an inherent worth that cannot be ignored, even when deeds and events would seem to prove otherwise.

"If Unitarian Universalism teaches us anything," says Rev. Bill Schultz, "it teaches us that, despite all its carnage and privation and disaster and disease, the world is full of blessings – the warmth of the sun; the refulgence of the earth; the healing powers of our bodies; the companionship of animals; the complexity of our minds; the generosity of our hearts; the very breath of life itself. These are outright gifts that Creation presents to us for the taking. We did not earn them; we did nothing to deserve them; they just are – the radiant gifts of an ever-giving universe. They are what theologians call the manifestations of grace."¹¹

There is grace everywhere. If Unitarian Universalism would teach us more, it would teach us how to combat evil in order to set those blessings free. It would teach us that the answer to the question, what can we do?, is that we can join together to act for a just and sustainable world where goodness and love shine for all...with radiance. It would teach us to make our voices heard and to bring our values to life, that justice would roll down like waters.

So be it. Amen.

READING

~ Rev. Victoria Safford

⁹ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*, noted at <http://whitebearunitarian.org.customers.tigertech.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/10-12-questions.pdf>

¹⁰ Refers to the children's story, *Extra Yarn*.

¹¹ <http://www.firstuuwilm.org/documents/The8thDEADLYSIN.pdf>

Sometimes I use a very subjective, almost subconscious barometer when reading the news of the day and deciding whether some action bears the weight of the word evil. It's not the magnitude of an event, nor the cold-heartedness of those involved, nor even the historical impact. It's the degree of heartbreak that I feel: beyond sorrow or horror, a sense that something has been blasted apart, a shattering of hope, the collapse of what I thought or wished were true about the world and human nature. There are some truths, some news, that break the heart – not permanently, but utterly, for a while, as the realization forms perhaps for the thousandth time: this, too, is part of our humanity. Evil is the capacity, within us and among us, to break sacred bonds with our own souls, with one another, and with the holy. Further, it is the willingness to excuse or justify this damage, to deny it, or to call it virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear, and delusion – mostly self-delusion – all mingled with the sparkling dust of our original, human being.

CLOSING WORDS

#320, Adapted

Our closing words are adapted from a hymn...words reminiscent of our chalice lighting words...reminding us that we can choose how we will use our powers:

The pen is greater than the sword. To wield a blade or write a word, is a choice that lies in our hands.

A surgeon takes a knife to heal; assassins do the same to kill. Each is an act of will, an act of choice.

We can pick the cherries from a tree, or break the branch and let it die.

With our fingers we can soothe a brow, or make a fist and strike a blow...choosing to act with kindness or with cruelty.

This is what lies with us, for like life itself, our hands can be used for evil or for compassion.

Go now and make less room for evil and cruelty. Crowd it out. Practice kindness and love. Nurture the sparkling dust of your very being.

Amen.