

THE REALITY OF EVIL

(10/23/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Job 1:6-7
1 John 18-21
3 John 1:11

“One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, ‘Where have you come from?’ Satan answered the Lord, ‘From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down it.’” (Job 1:6-7)

“We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one.” (1 John 5:19)

“Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” (3 John 1:11)

It’s nice to be back with all of you following my two-week vacation! It was good to get away, to take a break. I think I was more tired than I realized. I also must have listened to my remonstrations against an excessively busy lifestyle in my recent sermon entitled “Take Care of Yourself.”

You will have to bear with me this morning. Something very powerful happened to me during my vacation—actually, it happened to both Darlene and me. I don’t know exactly what to do with it, but I do know I want to share it with you. I would like to explore it in a sermon series, but not now. First, I don’t know exactly what I want to say—partially because I don’t totally understand the theological or spiritual ramifications of what happened. Second, this isn’t the time of year for such a heavy topic; we have Reformation Sunday, All Souls/All Saints Sunday, Stewardship Sundays, Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas, and New Year’s on the calendar for the next few months. Finally, the series would be more appropriate following Martin Luther King Day in January. For those of you who are listening to my remarks over the radio, my sermon title this morning is “The Reality of Evil.”

First, let me tell you what we did on our vacation, the first vacation Darlene and I have taken in three years. We didn’t spend it reclining on a beach in Cancun or Barbados. We drove to Montgomery and Selma, Alabama to see four museums. Then we drove to Pinellas Park, Florida to visit Darlene’s cousin Benny and his wife Helen; then Greenville, South Carolina to visit Jay, Ann-Marie, Emily Kate, and to visit Zach at Anderson University and Charlie at Furman University. We had breakfast with our transplanted church friends David Sickles, Joannie Brunelle, and her daughter, Lee, and we had lunch with Darlene’s niece, Missy, and her husband, Chris. We crammed a lot of very meaningful experiences into two weeks! We also drove a total of 3,900 miles.

I'm not saying that 3,900 miles is a lot of driving, but I would like to point out that it is the driving distance between Southborough and Los Angeles and then back as far as Denver. It is also approximately 15.6% of the distance around the earth at the equator (24,901 miles). Not that I would particularly like to drive around the earth at the equator; in addition to problems traversing the Amazon rain forest and countries just south of the Sahara Desert, the vast amount of water would be problematic. The distance we drove is also approximately 1.6% of the distance from the earth to the moon (238,900 miles). I don't know why I am telling you this; I have no desire to drive to the moon, nor is it a place that ranks high on our list of vacation destinations. I must be trying to impress you with how far we drove (though you might think that our decision to drive this many miles on a two-week vacation suggests that I consider taking a mental status exam)!

I confess that when I say, "we drove 3,900 miles," I am using the pronoun "we" quite loosely. I am also using it quite generously. Of the 3,900 miles, I drove 3,700 miles and Darlene drove 200. Not that I'm complaining, mind you; I like to drive, and she likes to ride. Because of the little-known rule of "Driver's Choice," I got to listen to Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, my favorite Pink Floyd albums, and some American short stories on cd. So, both of us came home happy—tired, but happy!

Let me get back to what we experienced in Montgomery. I had certain expectations of one of the museums, the one that prompted us to go to Montgomery—The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, also called the Lynching Memorial. The memorial opened in 2018, but we couldn't go down to see it because of the pandemic. It dramatically documents the over 4,700 Black people who were lynched as an integral part of a plan to systemically and systematically terrorize Black people who were striving for freedom, striving to claim what Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed for them.

The 13th Amendment as you know, reads as follows:

Section 1

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Section 2

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Section 2 makes a mockery of the notion of "states' rights." You might note that in Section 1, there is a loophole that I believe was written in by President Johnson, Abraham Lincoln's successor. No one shall be able to own slaves—*except* if the Black person has committed a

crime of which he/she has been duly convicted. That's quite a loophole! During Reconstruction and for a long time after, slaveowners were able to continue to own human beings by having them accused and convicted of some crime. Note that the crime does not need to be a felony. The first museum that we visited, the Legacy Museum, which traced the entire history of slavery, showed records of Black people who were kept in involuntary servitude because they had been convicted of "crimes" like loitering, being disrespectful to a white person, or being intoxicated. This was only the beginning of my growing awareness of the dark side of slavery, the evil of slavery. But I will say more about this later.

Let me step aside from a description of what I experienced at the three Montgomery museums or memorials: the Legacy Museum, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and the Rosa Parks Museum, and the Voting Rights Museum in Selma. Throughout the entire two-day experience and every day following, my mind kept returning to a disagreement between the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung and the Roman Catholic theologian Victor White.

I recently read an interesting collection of letters between Jung and Fr. White. Victor White, a Dominican theologian, was probably Jung's closest personal friend. Jung wanted his psychology of religion to be taken seriously by theologians in the Christian church, and Victor White realized the tremendous contribution that Jung's approach to understanding Christian spirituality, even to a deeper understanding of Christian dogma, could make to a church that was becoming petrified in its formalistic doctrines and canon law. In addition to their mutual interests in bringing these two strains of thought together, they simply enjoyed each other's company. Victor White was one of the few people who could drop by unannounced and uninvited when Jung was on retreat at the stone Tower he constructed in Bollingen.

Sadly, Jung and White finally parted company because of their inability to resolve a disagreement about a Roman Catholic doctrine. They disagreed about the nature and the reality of evil. That always seemed to me a strange reason to end a friendship—and it still does.

The Roman Catholic Church has traditionally maintained that there is no ontological reality to evil. Evil does not exist in itself; it does not exist by itself as a force in the universe or a force within each of us as human beings, a force within the psyche. The church, in its doctrine of *privatio boni*, maintains that evil is simply the absence of good. Jung, from having lived through two world wars, the Holocaust, and from his exploration of the depths of the human psyche, maintained that evil does exist, that it has its own power, and that it can possess people, take them over. It can lead individuals or groups of individuals or even nations to wreak not only havoc, but to incarnate, to let loose the dark power of evil upon their fellow human beings.

On several occasions, our dear friend Mattie Cummings and I discussed our differing understandings of evil. Mattie's understanding of evil (though she did not know it) was

congruent with Jung's point of view. She told me she had seen people in the backwoods of Haiti who had been possessed by demons, by Satan. I, coming down more on Victor White's side, believed that these "spells" might be attributable to epileptic seizures, a brain tumor, or an acute episode of schizophrenia. This sermon is, in part, an apology to Mattie. Through my experience in Montgomery, I have moved a lot closer to her point of view.

Regarding my basic agreement with Victor White and the Roman Catholic doctrine of *privatio boni*, I would note that of all the streams of psychology that have shaped my ministry as a psychotherapist and my understanding of religion, I have drawn most deeply from the humanistic tradition. I believe that all people are basically good. Our essential nature is good, not sinful. I have never been a big fan of the doctrine of original sin. We can become separated or alienated from our true, intrinsic nature through a variety of traumatic and other psychologically damaging experiences, and we can certainly make stupid or ill-advised decisions, but the core of goodness within us can never be totally eradicated. This is the reason why I believe that, at any moment, we can turn our life around, why I believe that all criminals have the possibility of being rehabilitated.

To use a metaphor, does darkness have an ontological reality, or is darkness simply the absence of light? Where there is no light, we have what we call darkness. Does cold have an ontological reality, or is it simply the absence of heat? If we have absolutely no heat, the thermometer would read absolute zero, 459.67 degrees below zero on the Fahrenheit scale (though no one could be there to observe it). It's not that it's cold, though it would certainly feel that way; it's that there is no heat. If we say that a person's heart is cold, we are saying that the person lacks the human warmth, the empathy, the compassion, the love that connects us so deeply and so beautifully with one another.

Just this past week, someone told me about a powerful experience she had. Because of where she was spiritually, psychologically, and in her surroundings, she had a profound experience of silence, an experience that she had never had, or had never consciously experienced. Does silence have a metaphysical, an ontological reality? Or is silence simply the absence of noise? Her experience brings to mind Simon & Garfunkel's "Hello Darkness, My Old Friend" from their album *The Sounds of Silence*.

So, is there such a "thing" as evil, or does the word simply describe a situation where good is temporarily absent? I have always thought that the Roman Catholic Church in general, and Victor White in particular, have a point in their belief that it is the latter.

There are other factors that incline me toward Fr. White's end of the spectrum. I believe that the entire universe, including each of us, is an incarnation of God's creative spirit. If this is true, then everything is basically good. Through our sin, we can move off-center; we can

become alienated from our true nature, but our true nature, the image of God within the depths of our soul cannot be touched, cannot be damaged, cannot be destroyed. If God is all good (which Jung questioned, and which Job, from his personal experience, also questioned), how can evil exist in the world?

If the Buddhists (whom I love) are correct in their assertion that everything has a divine Buddha nature, then the core of our being is good. If the Hindus are correct in their assertion that Brahman, the great spirit of the universe which finds expression within us as Atman is good, then every living thing is good. It is when we get pulled off center by our greed, our grasping, our ego-centric way of looking at life, that we lose touch with the goodness that is an essential part of our nature, that is the essential part of what it means to be a child of God. And it is then that we lose touch with our fellow human beings.

And yet, and yet . . . Mattie has a point! Jung has a point! As we heard this morning, there are numerous references to both evil and Satan in the Bible. From our personal experience and from our awareness of human history, I think most of us could testify to the metaphysical, the ontological reality of evil. There is a dark force that moves within the universe and within us. This dark force can take us over, can possess us, can lead us, or can cause us to do things that are not only illegal, not only wrong, not only bad, but evil.

To go back to the metaphors we examined, if we think about it, doesn't darkness have a power? Haven't you ever felt the power of darkness? Like the woman with whom I spoke this past week, haven't you ever felt the power of silence? Is cold simply the absence of heat, or does it have a power of its own? Can a coldness take over our heart?

When I participated in the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, I had not yet grasped the evil of human slavery. All I knew was that Black people had been denied the right to vote, and since we are a democracy, depriving people of the right to vote tears at the very heart of who we are. I was fighting for equal rights for Blacks. I never fully grasped the evil of slavery—not until my recent experience in the Legacy Museum, which documents the history of slavery in the United States, and the Lynching Museum, which forced us to put names and dates and other information to the 4,700 Black people who were lynched in a public forum both to terrorize other Blacks and also for the entertainment of the white people who turned out for these events.

Like Jung, I tend to think in terms of opposites. The opposite of correct is incorrect. The opposite of unselfish is selfish. The opposite of legal is illegal. The opposite of right is wrong. The opposite of good is bad. However, it seems to me that evil is in a totally different category. When we think of human beings who are evil, of actions that are evil, we are dropping down into

a very different level of the human psyche. I do not believe that good is the opposite of evil. I am not sure what it is, but it must be stronger than good.

For example, Darlene and I read the account of a young Black man who was lynched. The lynching was advertised in the local newspaper, which invited people to come to the town common on Sunday afternoon to watch the lynching. Parents were encouraged to bring their children, to bring a blanket and a picnic lunch. The young man was being lynched because he had walked behind a white woman on a sidewalk.

Lynching is not the same as hanging. When you hang someone, e.g., from a bridge, you let the person fall a considerable distance so that when the rope comes to an end, the person's neck will snap. It is actually a relatively compassionate way to execute someone. When Black people were lynched, their feet were raised only high enough above the ground to enable the spectators to watch the man struggle, thrash around, and gradually strangle. This enhanced the entertainment value of the spectacle.

In the Legacy Museum, we read hundreds of accounts of the lynching of Black people. In the one to which I am referring, the Black man managed to free his hands and hold onto the rope above his neck to keep himself from strangling. The authorities lowered him down and broke both his arms so he could not keep himself from being strangled. Then they raised him again. As he swung on the gallows, they cut off his fingers and distributed them to the crowd as souvenirs.

Now I ask you: was that lynching illegal? Probably not according to the laws of that state. However, from a deeper perspective, was it wrong? Was it bad? Or was it evil? And what about the spectators, those who came out to watch the spectacle of a human being, a child of God, being lynched? How many of them had come directly from church? How could they reconcile what was happening, and what they were watching and enjoying, with the teachings of Jesus? I am not sure what Jesus, the Christian gospel, and the church meant to these people.

When we concluded our walk through the Legacy Museum, Darlene and I had the same thought. We both realized we had encountered evil. We also realized that the last time we had experienced this so powerfully was the two times we visited the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau, just outside Munich. What made the Holocaust so powerful, so evil, was the murder of over six thousand Jews. But what about the kidnapping of twenty-seven million human beings who were sold into slavery, who were treated as less than human beings? Over two million died in transit from Africa to America and were simply tossed overboard. What, in God's name, did we do to these people? We separated husbands and wives from each other, parents from their children. We treated people, human beings, children of God as things—simply because of the color of their skin.

I think that's enough for today. I just want you to know that I had a nice vacation. On the ride home from South Carolina up Route 81 through the Shenandoah Valley, through Virginia, Pennsylvania, and then the Catskills, the foliage was magnificent! We were surrounded with beauty the entire length of the drive. We live in such a beautiful world! We had the opportunity to be not only with our relatives, but also with some dear friends, some old friends of the church, people who miss us, who love us, and who still feel a part of us.

But there was also this powerful feeling that we had had an encounter with evil. And, I confess, it was more than the absence of good. It made me think of a quote, perhaps from C. S. Lewis, to the effect that evil is not as frightening in the form of Satan with his horns and long tail roaming the earth as it is in the form of a human being. I agree. Although you and I were not responsible for what happened to these people, to this race, to these children of God, we *are* responsible for rooting out this evil where it exists today. Beginning within ourselves.

And finally, I firmly believe that the root of this evil is our inherent belief in white supremacy, and what our conscious or unconscious clinging to this notion does to the way we see and treat anyone who is different from us.

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