

June 14, 2020
How to Not Be Evil: Banality
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson

This is the second service in a series of sermons this month on how not to be evil.

If you didn't watch last week I hope you will, because I can't sum up "how not to be evil" in one sermon, or even in three.

I'll say more next week, but, friends, friends, the spiritual work of living a mature, faithful, decent and compassionate life, is life-long work.

I have been preaching to you most weeks for 12 years, and we have talked about this over and over again, as we should.

Because living well in complicated times is hard.

I like Nikki's word: we get jumbled.

So reflecting together is important.

How do we apply our values to this, or to that?

How do we reflect on those choices, and learn from what works?

What's eternal and what needs to change?

How can our ethical lives be stronger, more aligned, more inclusive?

This isn't just my topic this month but every month, and has been for liberal religion for its entire history.

In the early 1800's our religious forebearers made a radical argument:

that we needed to apply the eternal lessons of love, reason, compassion, and hope

to our time,

and not rely on the conclusions of people who lived and died a long time ago:

learn from their wisdom, yes,
but not crib their test results without thought or
consideration.

The idea was that the world was changing all the time –
yes, in 1805 too –
and so we needed to continuously reflect and learn and use
our reason.

In those years, the early 1800's, our religious ancestors
debated fiercely the moral issues of their day,
foremost among them the brutal institution of slavery.

Some were radicals, like William Lloyd Garrison, who
wanted to tear it down now,
others were reformers, who argued for gradualism and
better laws,
and some, like Theodore Parker, were both: they wanted
the abolition of slavery,
and they would take any victory in that direction they could
get.

They lobbied against the Fugitive Slave Act, and they send
money to John Brown.

These groups fought with each other sometimes,
disagreements about tactics but not the goal.

but there was another group,
and really, that group of Unitarians was more of an issue:
this was the group that wasn't engaged at all.

Wasn't thinking about it, wasn't concerned,
was going about their day.

Many of the wealthiest Unitarians owned textile mills in New
England,
and though they weren't slave-owners, they made their
money by turning cheap cotton
into mid-price goods for the world market.

So the saying went that when it came time for the church
bells to ring for abolition,
the Unitarian bells would not ring,
for they were too stuffed with cotton.

The truth is that it depended on the congregation, the
minister, the lay leaders, and the context.
Some were awake, and paying attention.
Others – like much of the country – were asleep.

What woke them up?
A lot of people speaking up.
Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, put them first on the
list.

And a white woman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote a book.
“The lady who started the civil war,” Lincoln called her,
but the truth is that she used her privilege as a famous
author
to get people to pay attention.
To wake up.

Was it perfect? God no. It should not have taken her words
to do that,
when Douglass and Tubman and Sojourner Truth and others
had their own words.

But the goal was to unstuff the ears. To wake the
conscience.
To wake the conscience.
To enliven empathy.
To get reason working – to question what was taken for
granted.

And once the questions began, once empathy awoke,
a tipping point was reached.
And, public opinion having shifted –

the asleep having become reformers (and some of the reformers becoming radicals)
the south decided that rather than have slavery end by legislation
they would go to war to try to save it.

The minister of this church at the time, Augustus Connat,
enlisted in the Union Army
and died in that war.

We could do a lot more about that history, about our history
as church and faith and nation,
but the point I want to make here
is this:
waking up is the first step.
Conscience.
Empathy.

To see what Hughes calls the silly walls
and know they have to go,
whether we look through his eyes or not,
or if we simply hear his words,
question our assumption that the wall is "natural",
and then join, comrade, in the journey.

An essential competent in how not to be evil
is to pay attention.
To think.
To question and wonder and be curious.
To grow our empathic heart.
To wake now our conscience and our reason.

Among all of the things that white privilege, or male
privilege, or wealth privilege is,
it is first an epistemological privilege, a shortage of
knowledge, really,
it is the privilege of being asleep.

It is the possibility of going through the day without seeming to experience racism, or sexism, or other forms of oppression.
I say "seeming to" because those things are all around us every day,
but some can sleep walk through them.

So I'm a lot less interested in the fights between the radicals and the reformers
than I am in figuring out how to wake folks up.
Because the work of resisting evil and making more good in the world
needs many players, many instruments, and many playbooks.
But it first needs folks who are awake enough to play and sing.

It was the philosopher Hannah Arendt who made this notion so clear to the world:
she published first a set of articles and then a book, Eichmann in Jerusalem, about Adolf Eichmann,
a functionary in the Nazi regime, who rose to be in charge of the transportation and logistics
of the death camps,
who fled and lived in hiding in Argentina after the war,
until he was captured and brought to trial in Israel.

Arendt, a Jewish philosopher from Germany who had fled to the United States,
covered the trial and wrestled, for the rest of her career, with Eichmann and the millions like him:
those who said "they didn't hate Jews", who "had Jewish friends",
and yet did nothing, and, in his case, Eichmann's case, played a critical role
in the execution of six million human beings.

Eichmann, she said, after observing him and reading his own writings,
the transcripts of interviews, and more,
was incapable of original speech or thought.
He did not think for himself.
It went beyond "he followed orders" – it was more than that;
he literally could not think, in her meaning of the term,
he could not consider the meaning of the phrases he repeated,
or the impact of what he was doing.
And thus, she wrote, his life, and his participation in such great horror,
without malice or evil intent,
revealed the utter banality of evil.

He lacked, she argued, a conscience.
In a later set of lectures, Arendt argues that this, conscience,
and its absence, is under considered as an ethical matter.
Conscience, she reminds us, means literally "with-thinking",
to think with others.
She too, was less worried about the disputes between people of conscience;
she noted that a person whose conscience is troubled,
who regrets their mistakes and worries that they did the right thing,
is far more ethically sound
than the person who is never troubled by their conscience,
who is convinced of their innocence, their goodness, and their righteousness
without questioning any of their assumptions
or even considering the consequences of their actions.
In Eichmann in Jerusalem, as well as in her book "On Totalitarianism",
she lays out the problem –

the way that the state closes down ways to consider
different ideas,
the way that folks don't think for themselves,
and, first and foremost, the lack of empathy – the vilification
and demonization
of any who disagree,
but in her later work she discusses the remedy:
what do we do to wake folks up?

And others have worked this problem too, extensively,
how do you break the barrier of banality and
engage the conscience?

Remember how I said I couldn't solve evil in one sermon?
This is a summary, the outline of a suggestion, based in our
values,
our faith, and the best social and political science.

Start with love.
Start always with love.

I know it's tempting to skip this, or to say, I can't love them,
but that's not our theology.
Our theology is that you start with respecting the dignity of
EVERY person.
All of them.
That's is a HUGE challenge.
Don't sell that short.
But you start with love for them,
and for yourself and all people.

If you want a religion that says some people are unworthy
of love and respect,
than you will have to choose a different one than this one.

That love and respect should lead to curiosity.
Why are they that way?

What do they care about?
What matters to them, who do they respect?
You have to start where people are.

Let me say here that as I'm talking about this,
I also have love and respect for folks whose identities are
more marginalized than mine is,
more on the line.

And this – starting where people are - is not their job.
That's asking too much emotional work.

It is my job.

It is the work for some of you – not all of you, but some of
you –

it's easier for some of us to wake up the sleeping
than it is for others – emotionally and physically safer.
So that's our work.

So you start with love,

then you figure out where they are.

Do they need a sports hero to convince them?

Do they need facts and figures?

Do they need a heart-to-heart story?

Do they need to be heard about their own trauma first, and
then moved to solidarity?

Where are they?

Ahrent, following Socrates, says that there are three
metaphors for waking up the conscience –
the gadfly, the stingray, and the midwife.

The gadfly irritates. They rouse, they pester, they get you
off your spot.

The stingray freezes. They make you stop and consider,
before you go off to the next task.

And the midwife brings to birth the new idea,
they synthesize, they elucidate, they connect.

What are you good at?
What skill do you need to be better at?
Being able to do all three of those things,
depending on the situation, can be very useful.
Sometimes you need to disrupt things,
and sometimes you need to support things that are
happening,
and sometimes you need to stop –
just stop –
and pause.

Love everyone,
meet them where they are at,
use the right tools,
and finally,
in the work of waking yourself up
and waking others up,
practice relentless humble curiosity.

Look into your own heart and mind – what are you missing,
what do you need to learn?
find mentors and guides to help you –
I have them, I ask them all the time about my struggles and
doubts,
because I know I don't always get this right –
Practice relentless humble curiosity –
what we've learned from social change is that what changes
hearts
is stories, questions, and beauty.
Stories – name the names, tell the stories – connect at a
deep level.
Questions make us wonder, and wonder can lead to
empathy.
Do you hear? Through the throng, through the rush, do you
hear?

And beauty – beauty attracts, it brings people into the new
that is coming to birth,
beauty and joy matter for justice, too.
If we want to wake the conscience,
we need to be nimble, thoughtful,
we need to be gadflies sometimes, stingrays sometimes,
and midwives sometimes,
we need to be humble, curious, and loving,
deeply loving,
and we need to cast, or share, a vision of the beautiful land
to which we are bound.

Without a vision, a compelling vision of the better world,
it will be hard to wake – when the comfort of the bed works
so well for too many,
we need to offer something that is enticing enough to rouse
up,
a journey to a better world,
where there are no silly walls,
where we respect what we see and feel and touch through
our own eyes and skin,
where we do hear, through the rush, the sighs and the
tears,
the hope and the joy,
a land to which we are bound
where all are seen as holy, free to live and love and
become,
where we are not sleep-walking, but dancing, learning,
striving, building,
and creating the world worthy of our praise and our faith.

None of what I've said about waking others is easy –
and all of it applies to ourselves, too.
Because that's the other piece.
Before we go waking others, we need to make sure our
empathy is both wide and deep,

we need to make sure we are leading with our love and our hope,
with our vision of that land,
so that we can invite, pause, and help bring to birth
that whose time has long come.

So, friends, know that I love you, that you are sacred,
that everyone is, and that we all have a role to play
in the journey, we all have some waking to do,
some work before us,
and that this is no time
to sleep through the revolution.

June 21, 2020
How Not to Be Evil: Theodicy
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson

I was 18.
A first year student in college,
and in the great books class.
They didn't call it the great books class,
I think it was "foundations of civilization" or something,
I don't remember.
But it was a great books class.
We started with Homer's Odyssey
and we finished, as I recall, with Toni Morrison's Beloved.
In the fall semester, we read the book of Job,
and I first heard the word Theodicy.

The problem of evil,
that's what it means, in Greek,
actually, it means "God's justice"
or, as a question, Is God Just?

Job's answer is . . . not really, no.
God is powerful and mysterious, but just?
In a way we understand?

Not really.
At least he was honest.

Later, I read the Brothers Karamazov,
and followed the logic of the argument:
that the rebel, the theological rebel, Ivan,
cannot accept the brutal murder of children-
he recounts the news of that century,
he recites the names of places of people
that would be known to his readers,
so we say our names
Tamir Rice
Travon Martin
Newtown, Connecticut
Columbine, Colorado
The Border, the cages, the children,
we have our list
Ivan Karamozov names his,
and cries out, what God?
What God worthy of our love could let these things happen?

Later, I read Anthony Pinn,
Unitarian Universalist
Humanist
and world-renowned Scholar of African American religion,
who reminds us
yes, some enslaved Africans turned to the God of Exodus,
the God who freed the people,
who drowned the pharaoh's army,
but others said, no,
no god who would let this happen
no god to whom the master would pray
is worthy of my prayer

Theodicy is a Greek word, an old word,
a cold word,
what we mean is evil

pain and suffering
tragedy and oppression
and whether or not we're okay with it.
Because if we're okay with a god that's okay with it,
then we're okay with it.

Not a single argument I will make today is new or original to me.

I invoke the ancestors, the scholars, the writers, the artists,
the justice-makers,
who precede us,
from the heretics of the 1st century to the ones of ours,
feminists, womanists, indigenous people, gay and lesbian
and gender-queer people,
Marxists and Buddhists and Christians

yes, Christians too, who have looked at the traditional
doctrine of God
and the reality of evil in the world,
of unspeakable, horrible evil,
and said,
no.
no.
I will not have it.

To that, I will not pray.
To that, I will not pledge my allegiance.

We are on the third sermon about how not to be evil,
and here is the message for today:
one way to not be evil
is to not worship an evil God.

Do not worship an evil God.

When I was 18, and I read that book, and learned those
things,

I said,
aha
this is why I am a Universalist and a Unitarian.

For I will not abide a God who delights in punishment.

John Murray, the founder of Universalism in American,
made this argument.
[tell the story of the kitchen].

Even less so would a loving God
condemn a single of their children to the fires of hell.

If your God believes that people will be punished for who
they love,
then that is not a God I can abide.
If your God picks some people with cancer to survive, but
not others,
that is not a God I can abide.

If your God permits slavery, genocide, the abuse of children,
that is not a God I can abide.

If your God hates, seeks vengeance, fights wars,
causes plagues or earthquakes or car accidents
that is not a God I can abide.

If you think "but for the Grace of God go I,"
when you see suffering,
what kind of God is that –
that makes some people suffer, or lets it go on?
That is not a God I can abide.

Does this mean I don't believe in God?

Well, I definitely do not believe
in the orthodox definition:

a being who is all knowing
all powerful
and all good
because if they were all powerful
and all good
this would not be the world we live in.

And I have studied the fancy theological footwork
more than almost anyone
all the explanations
about privation of good, freedom of the will
and the best possible world, thank you very much Voltaire,
and I say,
nope.

I don't buy it.

The one thing I do sometimes
somedays
find persuasive is this:
that instead of an orthodox God
who controls our lives,
lets us suffer
and judges us harshly,
there might be a vision
of a holy power
which is incarnate in us, the natural world,
which is expressed in those prayers of Rev. Soto:
mercy
tender love
the silent squeeze of the hand

a holy power that isn't a separate being
but the presence of love
known by names like
healer
peace maker

sustainer
joy
way

Rabbi Sandy Sasso, the author of our story for all ages today,
is in this book, and her other work,
pointing toward a vision of the holy that is radically different
than the orthodox judger,
the punisher,
the vengeance seeker.

When we speak of the holy,
if we speak at all,
silence might be better,
but when we speak of the holy,
when we image it,
when we name it, tentatively,
when we describe what we feel,
we shape reality,
we shape our hearts,
we shape our longings,
our community, our world.

There is a saying that when you pray
you don't change God, you change yourself,
and if something like that is true,
then be careful what you pray for.

This argument is made more academically
by the German theological Ludwig Feuerbach,
who argued that "God" is nothing more than that
on which we project our highest values.
God is a kind of blank screen,
and what we say about God says more about us.

Is our God Lord?

A general? The commander of an army?

A old white man, prone to vengeance and arbitrary acts of violence?

I mean, that is the experience of power that many people have through the centuries.

But if we have a different vision, we shift our hearts in different ways.

This is the power in liberation Christianity, which says, don't forget,

we worship a man of color who was killed by the police, and yet he preached love to sex workers, the sick, the poor, the immigrant and the outsider.

We worship a man of color who was killed by the police. Some Christians know this. They proclaim it.

Others have . . . forgotten.

Feuerbach's point is echoed by the Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote that "that which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore," he continues, "it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

It behooves us to be careful what we worship for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

That's why it's not enough for me

to just throw the idea of the sacred and holy out completely.
There's a baby in that bathwater.

Because those words of Emerson's are preceded by this
reminder:

a person will worship something – have no doubt about
that.

We will worship something.

People make all kinds of choices.
They worship power,
They worship money, wealth, prosperity.
They worship health.
They worship race, tribe, identity.
They worship a creed, a building, a story about the past.
They worship themselves, their ego, their comfort,
what they already think is true.

These choices have consequences.
They have consequences for our heart,
for our actions,
and for the world we share together.

So I don't think the option is
"don't worship anything"
though, absolutely, "don't worship God"
is very much an option.

But I think that we will worship something,
and so it behooves us to be thoughtful,
if we want to avoid evil,
in our own heart, and in the world,
we need something to worship
that is worthy of highest values,
we need a name that's worthy of naming
at the waters of gathering.

Now, we are Unitarian Universalists,
and so I'm not going to tell you what name to use
for what cannot be named,
but I can tell you what I've seen,
what I've learned,
since that great books course
all those years ago
provoked these questions in me.

I think it helps us avoid evil and move toward good
when we have a rich incarnational sense of divinity.
This is what the first and seventh principle of Unitarian
Universalism calls for:
the worth of each person,
the sacred interdependent web of existence,
a sense that the holy is present,
alive
in our hands and hearts
in the wailing mother
and the infant child
in the protestor
and the police officer, too,
in the righteous
and in the self-righteous,
in the saint and the sinner,
as if one was one and one was the other, always,
which is not how it is.

To see the holy present in nature matters too:
for the lagoon and the mountain top and the deep sea,
the brownfield and the weed coming up through the crack in
the sidewalk
the stars and the atoms
the galaxies and the quarks
all of it
sacred.

And when we hold this notion,
it can change how we act toward each other,
the choice we make,
about how we treat other people
and how we treat ourselves.

We should remember that our words and definitions about
the holy
are functional: they should serve to make us better people.
But what is better? More powerful, more confident, less
anxious about injustice?
Or something else?
More humble, more kind, more compassionate?

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the great American preacher,
wrote the words of God of Grace and God of Glory,
not a song we sing often, but maybe we should:
for in it, he prays as much to the people as to God:
grant us wisdom,
cure our warring madness,
fill us with vision for peace, heal our wounds.

You could read that as hope for an external remedy,
for an outside force to come fix us,
a hope that Anthony Pinn and others correctly dismiss
as unhelpful, as a denial of our responsibility to care for
each other and the earth.
But Fosdick, like other liberals, means for us to be the acts
of the holy,
for us to do the work,
that the holy is in our peacemaking, our healing, our vision
for a better, fairer, more just world.

Your vision of the holy should challenge you to be more
than you are –

to be more peaceful, more compassionate, more generous,
it should inspire you and encourage you,
and, I think, it should disrupt you in some way.

If your God hates all the people you hate, well,
as the saying goes,
isn't that convenient?

I find it less useful, for myself, to think of God as a noun
and more useful to think of God as a verb,
if I use the word God at all,
which, usually, I don't.
I think instead in Taoist terms, or the language of process
theology,
to think about the spirit, the way, the holy power
which flows through and among and between,
which connects and inspires,
and is lived out through us and all of life.

The problem of evil is known as Theodicy,
as God's justice – or God's injustice.
But the real issue, the real problem of evil,
isn't about God, it is about us.
It's about our justice, or injustice,
and blaming God – or giving God the responsibility instead
of
holding our part of the work –
doesn't fly.

If we want a vision of the holy,
a power that lives in and between us,
which might move us to justice
to justice and mercy and compassion
then it is not theodicy that we might concern ourselves with
–
the question of God's justice,
the problem of evil,

but instead,
caritas –
caritas, a latin word this time, not a Greek one,
caritas, love.
Holy love for another, for self, for the world,
love for the flourishing of others,
for their own sake.
Ubi caritas et amor,
where love and affection exist,
Ubi caritas et amor,
where love and affection exist,
deus ubi est,
god is there.

The question isn't why does God allow evil,
the question is, how can we be so filled with the spirit of
love,
so taken with affection for each other,
that we work together to heal the wounds,
to build justice,
and to live with compassion?

The question isn't "when will God save us"
but "when will we recognize that we must love one
another?"

In the end, how not to be evil –
a complicated question, with many aspects,
has a profoundly simple answer.
The question, "how do we not be evil?"
is answered with another question,
"how might we live as people of love?"

Ubi caritas et amor,
deus ubi est.