

A Theology of Evil

A Sermon by Rev. Betty Kornitzer

December 5, 2004

I open with a reading by Alexander Solzhenitsyn:

“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 runs through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?”

The Second Reading is from the writing of Martin Niemoeller, one of the main opponents of Nazi racial ideology in the Lutheran Church. These words were written following the war and his liberation from a concentration camp:

“First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist - so I said nothing. Then they came for the Social Democrats, but I was not a Social Democrat - so I did nothing. Then they came for the trade unionists, but I was not a trade unionist. And then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew - so I did little. Then when they came for me, there was no one left who could stand up for me.”

Earlier this week my son asked about this Sunday’s service. “Oh, I said it’s New Member Sunday, and the sermon is on the theology of evil.” “What were you thinking?” he said and snickered, really, he snickered. Then, he asked: “So what are you expecting in terms of numbers, Mom?” He’s got a point, and I’m really glad to see you all here. Unitarian Universalists aren’t easily frightened!

Now I know that the theology of evil is a pretty heavy issue, and some of you – like my son – may be wondering “Okay Betty, now just how does this sermon fit with New Member Sunday. So I’m going to tell you: it’s all part of the good news – the gospel that we have to share with New Members. And the good news is this: Here at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County we go deep as a people of faith. We come together to wrestle with the questions that trouble our minds and keep us up at night.

Today we wrestle with the problem of evil. And at times it may feel like mud wrestling, for – sometimes we have to get down in the dirt to feel its grit and smell its earthy musk so that we may know its name and speak it.

We are here to seek truth, and we may get a bit muddy in the process. For today we will work to unearth and to understand the dirty realities of humankind's enormous capacity for inhumanity, a capacity whose name is Evil.

I will ask us each to examine our own complicity in allowing the world to slip into heartlessness. For –

If only there were evil people somewhere...

If only the beast was external to us, and not waiting somewhere in the earthy shadows of our lives... *“but the line dividing good and evil runs through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?”*

We are a faith community, and there is work to be done. Let's roll up our sleeves and prepare to dig deep and to get our fingernails dirty. Today, together we do the spiritual work necessary to deal with the presence of evil, and to discern a way to deal with it from the perspective of our faith. Today, we excavate, we shine the light of truth and reason on the shadow side of life – and we do a bit of mud wrestling.

So, just what do we mean by “evil”? Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck is author of the book People of the Lie, a study in human evil. Peck notes that somewhere in our hearts we understand the nature of evil. He defines evil as that which is “in opposition to life, [it is] that force ...that seeks to kill life or liveliness.” It attacks the body and it attacks the spirit.

The problem of evil immediately moves us to ask questions: Why...why... why – how many times has your heart broken open and wailed these words into the night, as a personal tragedy or a new atrocity is brought to light?

Poet Helvecio Mendes speaks our horror, he writes

*I want to know why
The rain is falling,
I want to know why
There is a rainbow in the sky
I want to know why
The people are hungry
Why
Life in this country is at a
standstill
Why
The days seem to grow longer And
life shorter
Why
The people are forced to tighten
their belts
Watching their harvest
Being shipped off
Why
Children have no milk on their
table
Neither rice to eat*

*I want to know why
Those children are singing
Why
There is a red moon sleeping
In the sea
Why
Soldiers are trained to kill
To hate
To rage
To savage
To steal
Why darkness is coming
As darkness has
Reigned
For so long...
But above all
I want to wake up in the morning
and hear
Everybody shouting
WHY? WHY? WHY*

In digging and building a theology of evil, our questions, our cries of WHY? Are all about the nature of humanity and the nature of the divine.

We question: Why are human beings inhumane?

Television broadcasts and newspaper articles assail us with images that break our hearts, evoke fury and judgment and make us hang our heads and weep. The 20th century was more than enough. Listening with the ears of the heart we bore witness to:

The cries of those tens of millions who died in the d trenches of the first World War-

We bore witness to the cries rising in the smoke of the Holocaust –

We bore witness to the cries from the carnage of the second World War

We bore witness to the cries of burning flesh in Hiroshima and Nagasaki-

We bore witness to the cries of the tens of millions exterminated in the gulags of Stalin's Russia-

We bore witness to the cries of innocent civilians gunned down in Mi Lai-

We bore witness to the cries of a nation slaughtered on Killing Fields of Cambodia-

-We bore witness to the cries of neighbors killing neighbors in Bosnia-

We bore witness to the cries of the Rwandan Genocide-

We bore witness to he cries of a city and a nation rising from the rubble in Oklahoma City-

We bore witness to the cries of children killed by children at Columbine High School -

At the close of the century, from every vantage point, we looked back and wept – WHY? WHY?

We know that the new Millennium has witnessed no improvement in, as the rubble and the bodies of war and hatred pile around our grieving hearts.

Evil has been called “The Rock of Atheism,” for it gives rise to the question: where is God in the midst of all this evil?

In 1981, Rabbi Harold Kushner’s young son, Aaron, died of a rare disease. The Rabbi spiraled into a crisis of faith, which led him to write the book entitled When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Most of us are familiar with this very popular book, but interestingly almost *everybody* thinks that the title is Why Bad Things Happen to Good People. We are stuck on the question WHY. Like homing pigeons, we return again and again home to the aching questions in our hearts: WHY would God allow good people to suffer.

Rabbi Kushner’s spiritual quest leads him to relinquish the idea that God is all powerful in favor of the idea that God is all good. The rabbi focuses on the human faculty of free will. He discerns that God has given to humanity the ability to choose between good and evil. It is this very capacity to choose that makes us human. Therefore, for God to obstruct our ability to do evil, would make us all less than human. In the Rabbi’s understanding, God gave to humankind the exquisite gift of choice. We do not live by instinct alone, free will require that we live by discernment.

In a free universe, our choices are

We will never fully understand why evil exists, but perhaps there are more important questions. What does it mean to be human? In part it means that there is a shadow side, and we ignore it at our peril. For no one among us really knows exactly where the line dividing good and evil runs through our own heart. Where do we each fall on the continuum of human choice between good and evil?

Rabbi Kushner asked the question “where was God” when bad things happen to good people, we might ask the question: “where was humanity?”

This is perhaps the most important question of all.

It is a Faith question. Could we each be a partner in evil? Let us ask ourselves: Could I be one who looked away in silence when *they came for the Communists, because I was not a Communist... or when they came for the Jews, because I was not a Jew?*

We have been hearing a lot about moral values lately, and I think that's a good thing. When I think of moral values I take this little gray card out of my wallet, I read it and I smile. This card lists the Seven UU Principles, friends, they are something to stand behind and be proud of. For me they form the core of a code of moral values – and such a code is our best insurance against slipping into the complacency of those who lower our eyes and look the other way. Once again, in writing this sermon I didn't plan to read the principles, but honestly they move me, and I really just can't resist. Listen up, this is good stuff.

“We the member congregations of the UUA covenant to affirm and promote:

- 1. The **inherent worth and dignity of every person.***
- 2. **Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.***
- 3. **Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. .***
- 4. **A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.***
- 5. **The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregations and in society at large.***
- 6. **The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.***
- 7. **Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.***

When you step into the pit for a round of mud wrestling with the problem of evil – be sure to slip one of these cards into your pocket. It will help you to make good choices.

If there be evil in this world, and in the heart of humanity, just how are we to live with it and live well?

We take responsibility. We unearth evil and hold it to the light. We affirm our faith principles and live by them. We wrestle in the mud to discern with clarity that line that divides good and evil. And we find the courage to act for the good. This is happening all around us...every day.

It is happening in the jungles of Sierra Leone, where rebels forcefully recruited children as young as seven to be soldiers, and taught them to kill. There the light of truth and courage is shining. There these children are being rescued and re-introduced to a lost childhood. There choices are being made for the good.

It is happening in the lives and hearts and actions of whistleblowers in the corporate world. There are many modern examples, but I'll always remember the story of Karen Silkwood, the nuclear facility employee who dared to report worker safety violations and died in a mysterious accident on her way to meet with a reporter from the New York Times.

You may have noticed that I have not offered a clear definition of evil. All I can offer is a chance to do a bit of mud wrestling with the questions raised by the problems of evil.

May we all be reminded that as human beings we have been given the exquisite gift of discernment, the gift of choice. May we use it well.

I close with the words of the young adolescent national spokesperson fighting the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. Before his death this year, he spoke these prophetic words:

*Do what you can
With What you have-
In the time you have left-
In the place you are.*

Blessed Be & Amen