

“What is Evil”

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6 August 2017

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

On this day, 72 years ago our world was changed. The American bombing of Hiroshima, a city in southern Japan, by the world’s first launched atomic bomb, killed 80,000 people instantly, and another 60,000 would die within the year from side effects. Three days later, the second A-bomb would be dropped on Nagasaki, killing another 40,000 people. And, although there had already been nuclear research and nuclear weapons research happening for more than a decade, in the United States, and elsewhere around the world, it was this event, August 6th 1945, that many people consider the beginning of an era. However, evil existed before this great catastrophe.

2300 years ago there were gladiator games, a time when Roman Emperors and their subjects would watch slaves, criminals and in later years volunteers fight to the death in an arena against wild animals and each other. Or the brutal killings of minority religious groups, throughout the ages by those in power, be it the Romans, the Catholics, the Protestants, even into the 20th century by Nazi Germany. Not to mention all of the religious wars that were not from the Judeo-Christian denominations. And even today, in a world where humanitarian aid is at its highest, and the United Nations has members from 193 of the world’s 196 countries, evil is a predominant player, with acts of terrorism, extremist groups, and the heightened sense of nationalism the world round. But, if evil is as social scientist James Waller suggests “anything that is detrimental to the wellbeing of living things” shouldn’t we be able to overcome it? Shouldn’t human kind, with the technologies of space travel, harnessing nuclear energies to power cities, growing human tissue in a petri dish for the purpose of transplants and creating computers with artificial intelligence, be able to overcome that which is detrimental to living things?

So although the vast majority of our world has stepped away from the religious roots that could explain away evil as a supernatural force, something that could be avoided if one were to follow the right path, we have instead moved into a secular world where evil is a natural human force that can be overcome by those who have higher moral constructs, people who have “better” understandings of what is right and wrong.

On the 70th anniversary of the bombing, in 2015, Hiroshima Mayor, Kazumi Matsui stated that nuclear weapons were an absolute evil, and has urged the world to put an end to them. He says “to coexist we must abolish the absolute evil, and ultimate inhumanity that are nuclear weapons.” He argues that evil is a thing outside of humanity, and not a part of our nature.

Whereas Noam Chomsky argues the opposite. In an article written for *The Guardian*, he states “If some extraterrestrial species were compiling a history of homo sapiens, they might break their calendar into two eras: BNW or before nuclear weapons and NWE the nuclear weapons era. The latter era, of course, opened on August 6 1945, the first day of the countdown to what may be the inglorious end of this strange species, which attained the intelligence to discover the effective means to destroy itself, but – so the evidence suggests – not the moral and intellectual capacity to control its worst instinct.”

These two concepts of what evil is, one in which evil is an external thing to humanity and the other where evil is a thing that only those with high morals can overcome, have led to this point in time, where we believe that the righteous can triumph over evil, that it can be vanquished and that humanity can live in, as Charles Dickens would say, the Season of Light.

But what if both of these philosophies are wrong? In one scenario we have evil being an external force that exerts its power over humankind, and will never be lifted from our shoulders; in this camp we have Christians who believe that evil comes from original sin, and Buddhists who argue that light cannot exist without darkness as well as several other religions. And in the other scenario we have evil being a force of human nature that needs to be overcome by those elite few who possess the moral capability, and the liberal enlightenment to overcome the humans who lack such qualities; this camp consists of Western Liberalism versus Middle Eastern extremism, or Nazi Germany and the Axis powers versus the Allied powers of World War II.

What if the concept of evil being inhumane, or not of humanity AND the concept of evil being one part of humanity that can be out balanced by another part of our humanity- were both unhelpful ways of thinking about evil? What if neither of these ways of seeing our world helped us to have a clear enough vision to overcome that which we are trying to explain?

When I was a child one of the lessons that was taught to me over and over again was the concept of triangulation. Of course I didn't really know what that meant, but what I did know was that trying to affect someone else's relationships was wrong. I was

told this so many times that I forget when and where the lesson originated; perhaps when I was tattling on my younger brother in attempts to get him in trouble with one of my parents; or when I was trying to get my two best friends to make up after a fight and then had both of them mad at me; or it could have even been when I would attempt to play my parents against each other in hopes to convince them that I could do something I probably shouldn't. But I definitely heard this repeated over and over again, my dad's voice telling me that I could not affect the relationship between two other people, and that I shouldn't let other people affect my relationships. He used a diagram many times, drawing a triangle on a piece of paper, naming each of the corners and telling me I could only affect the relationships that were attached to me.

Now I knew that I could affect the other relationships, but he was telling me that it was wrong to do so. And it took me a while to figure it out, sometimes I wonder if I am still trying to figure it out. There have definitely been a few times recently when I need to be reminded that I was attempting to triangulate situations that I had no control over. That I shouldn't be messing with other people's relationships and decisions. And it makes sense, no matter how good your intentions are, no matter how carefully you put it, no matter how cautious you are, when you attempt to affect someone's opinion about another person, or about their ideas, things turn out bad.

This same analogy of a triangle helps me to see the concept of evil in a new way. Evil is a part of every person, we all have a relationship with it, that cannot be broken or removed. Each of us has the capacity for evil, and for good. The part that I believe society has gotten wrong is recognizing that and being fully conscious of our capability to cause harm to living things. We then get sucked into a pattern of attempting to explain, alter and fix other people's relationship with their own evil, instead of focusing on our own.

I believe that it is my own choice, to live into the good and the evil that exists within me. I also believe that each person will live into their possibilities as they choose to. And I believe that I should have no say in what path you should chose. Just as I should have no say in who you should have relationships with, and what opinions you should hold. But what I can do is to tell you what and how I think, I can explain how I see things, and about how I will live into the possibilities that exist within me, and I will hope that you can do the same.

In my First Light article this week I quoted Alexander Solzhenitsyn, from his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, about the experiences of being a prisoner in the Soviet Labour Camps. He wrote, "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 his own heart?” How could we cut out the piece of evil in someone else?

I believe that this is the reason why evil exists so fervently within the world, and why after eons of attempting to rid ourselves of it, humans are still being consumed by evil. Once I start telling you what is wrong and right, and once I start trying to take away from you what is wrong, I am now putting myself into a triangulation between you and your ideas, choices and relationships. No person has the authority to do that. No person has the authority to say that, and to tell another person how they should be within this world. Just like I should not have attempted to make my parents angry at my brother, I should not tell someone that the choices that they have made are wrong, and that I know better than they do what is right. This will just end up leading to more problems than originally.

It might seem like a simplistic understanding of good and evil, but it is the only one that I can see where we can take a stance and make a change, when we start with ourselves. Understanding our own relationships and being diligent and conscious about how they affect the world.

The reading that I shared with you earlier, “The Imprint of Love” by Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, minister in Williamsburg Virginia is a prayer that speaks to this uncertainty and hope deep within each of us. I only shared part of it earlier, but I would like to share it all now:

As people of faith,
we seek to live in a spirit of love,
a spirit of community, justice, and peace.
And yet, in so many corners of the world both far and near,
we see divisiveness and hate.
If we look deep within ourselves,
perhaps we will even find those shadow energies there too.
We struggle to respond to the outer world
and our inner dramas
in ways that manifest love.
At times we may fear that love will not be strong enough.
At times we may question whether love really is at the root of all things,
in this world with so much struggle and suffering and discord.
We may struggle to hold on to our faith in love,
knowing that if all things come from the one source we proclaim,
that source must somehow hold hate as well as love,

violence as well as peace,
evil as well as good.

This is the mystery within which we live and die.
These are the questions that haunt our days and nights.
And yet we are not without hope.
Our struggles and our questions testify to our longing for peace, for love.
Our very longings
are born out of that mystery
we dare to address as “Spirit of life and love.”
In the stillness and silence of our own heart
we read the imprint of love
created not by our own will,
but planted there for us to discover.
By what or whom, we cannot know, and yet it is there:
A clue,
a talisman,
a beacon,
a light within.
May it keep hope alive
even as we dwell in mystery.
May it guide us all as we seek to act wisely and well.
May it help us to be vessels of compassion for one another
and for our world.

May we live into this idea of good and evil, witnessing the imprints of love and the shadows of hate and divisiveness within ourselves.

May we learn to accept both and choose what we can for ourselves, while letting others choose for themselves what they can.