

Unnaming Evil

Genesis 4:1-9; Romans 12:9-21

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This is the final sermon in a six-week sermon and class series called “All This We Believe,” put together to kick off the fall program year in 2012. More than 150 church members took a fifteen-minute faith survey that we used as the basis of the class and series, looking at the various beliefs surrounding matters of faith and theology. The survey revealed ways in which our members have vastly different beliefs about topics such as heaven and hell, prayer, judgment, miracles, and biblical authority, yet still come together in worship and service in the name of Jesus Christ.

Fred Craddock writes about his experience in New York City when he was asked to preach at the famous Riverside Church.¹ Riverside’s pastor, William Sloane Coffin, was going to be out of town and invited Craddock not only to preach, but also to stay in his apartment for the weekend. Craddock agreed, glad to help his friend.

The Sunday morning he was in New York, Craddock woke up early and headed to the kitchen for something to eat. There he noticed a note taped to the refrigerator. It read, “There is nothing in here, Fred. Go to the church and there is breakfast there for you.” Fred opened the fridge up anyway, saw that there was nothing, and headed off to the church, thinking, “Well, this’ll be good. I’ll eat with the staff, find out where I am to sit, stand, who does what and when. I’ll get the complete orientation.” He grabbed his robe and headed out the door.

As he approached the church, he saw a line around the building, turning the corner from one street to another, what looked like hundreds of men from the street standing outside the church. Craddock got in line and waited until it was his turn to get a scoop of egg, a sausage patty, a biscuit, and a cup of coffee, and then took a seat across from a man who looked like he had seen better days. In a conversation with the man, Craddock learned he used to be a stockbroker but got to drinking so much that he lost everything—his job, his house, and his marriage. Having recently achieved 6 months of sobriety, the man had set out to get to know his grandkids, but he fell into drinking again and found himself back on the streets of New York City.

After sharing his story, the man asked Craddock, “Where are you from?”

“Georgia.”

“And what do you do?”

“I’m a preacher.”

He laughed and said, “It gets all of us, doesn’t it?”

Craddock writes, “When he said that to me, I wanted to get up and take a knife to hit on the glass to get everybody’s attention, stand up on the table and say, ‘Listen you losers. In a few minutes, I’ll be in one of the great pulpits of America, and you’ll be back on the street. I’m not like you.’ But I didn’t, because it would not have been true.” How many times have we thought something similar? Someone who has been hurt by the church finds out that we regularly attend worship. We immediately jump to distance ourselves from whatever negative experience this person had, explaining

that our welcoming church shares little in common with the Christianity that has so wounded that person.

For some of us, when family members come to visit, we constantly roll our eyes and hope that our friends see the hard work we've done to overcome our roots and create our own identity. We try to distance ourselves from all sorts of things, desiring to define ourselves by the qualities we hold up to be the best in our lives, whether they are socio-economic standing, political beliefs, ways we parent, or maybe our education. We want to be known for what we deem is the best version of ourselves.

As we wrapped up a joint education class discussing different aspects of faith in our church, the topic of evil was something we only had the opportunity to talk about for a few minutes. When the class was over, people commented on how evil is something that we as a church and as individuals don't spend much time on—that, for the most part, evil is something “out there”—something we associate with the faces of those we find threatening.

It seems as though we try our best to distance ourselves from evil by naming those who most fully personify evil, giving it a face that looks nothing like us: Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Osama Bin Laden, Charles Manson, Jeffrey Dahmer, Jerry Sandusky. Once we identify these “evil” people, we see pretty clearly that *evil is something other*, something far removed from who we are and what we experience every day.

About 15 years ago, Andrew Delbanco wrote a book called *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*. We do not have a language to talk about evil. He claims that we have “no language to connect our inner lives with the horrors that we read about every day—mass murders, school shootings, racial violence, civil wars.”² Delbanco believes that our society has worked through a process of “unnaming evil,” one that began centuries ago but has sped up in the past fifty years.

We worry that too much talk of evil will drive people away from the church. We believe that our thinking has become so much more sophisticated than that of our earlier ancestors, and we blame most atrocities in this world on ignorance rather than evil.

Sure, we are entertained by the battle of good versus evil in the movies. Since 2002, fifty superhero movies have been made:³ Iron Man, Elektra, Spiderman, the X-Men, the Incredibles, Thor, the Hulk, and Catwoman. These movies are in higher demand now than they have been at other points in history. It appears that evil is something we have outsourced to the world of entertainment.

This past Halloween, a fourth grade boy I know was trying to decide who to dress up like. He asked his parents, “Who is the guy that wears red and has antlers, a tail, and a pitchfork? Maybe I could be that guy.” The boy was describing the image of the cartoon devil. Maybe it is not such a bad thing that the images of the devil running around with a red pitchfork are becoming obsolete. But as evil slips out of our focus, it hasn't disappeared from the world around us.

Peter Gomes, in an article about evil and scripture, states, “In the Bible, evil is real...it is not an illusion or a state of mind or a moral inconvenience.”⁴ We can read about evil in more than 500 places in scripture. From the creation stories to the exile, in the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament letters, in the Psalter and in the Gospels, *evil is not something scripture shies away from*.

What we often fail to recognize, Gomes suggests, is that ignorance is not the only

reason good people do bad things and that knowledge itself cannot prevent us from evil. Cain knew that he should not be envious of his brother nor should he murder him. He knew what was right, yet he did wrong. Joseph's brothers knew that it was wrong to sell their younger brother into slavery, but they acted on their passion rather than their sense of right and wrong. Paul, in Romans 7, writes that he does not understand his own actions for he does not do what he wants but does the very thing he hates.

C.S. Lewis published a novel in 1942 called *The Screwtape Letters*. The book is a series of letters written from Screwtape, a Senior Demon, to Wormwood, his nephew and a Junior Tempter. Wormwood's assignment is to guide his human away from God and toward evil. Overzealous, Wormwood tries to turn his average human into an evil sociopath, but Screwtape advises the Junior Tempter that his objective is *not* to get his human to commit anything spectacularly evil, but that "the safest path to hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."⁵

C.S. Lewis captured the essence of evil as a kind of slow, confusing force that has great power, a force that somehow turns German shop keepers and accountants into SS guards; a force that convinces millions of Americans that Separate can be Equal; a force that moves a group of Cambodian peasants to political activists and then to a military force and finally into torturers.

I am not advocating that we become obsessed with evil. I have known people who spend all too much time trying to find evil in every person and every room that they walk into. They run the risk of seeing only darkness, of missing out on joy by being overcome with evil. While some of us do not take evil seriously enough, many others take evil too seriously. If we deny evil, we may constantly be surprised by the actions of others and potentially *even* our own. If we think about evil too much, we make evil the thing we worship—we make evil the focus of our attention, and we will live in constant fear.

Our New Testament reading gives us instructions on how to live in a life of faith and, in just twelve verses, Paul gives almost thirty pieces of advice. Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil and cling to what is good. Love one another in mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. The list goes on, and out of all these teachings, only one of them is negative—*hate what is evil*.

Sure, the primary ways we see the church addressing evil may be to either discount its power or to obsess over the lurking danger it imposes. In the twelfth chapter of Romans, Paul proposes another way. The text provides a beautiful image of what living a holy life might look like, and we have a lot of loving to do. Paul tells us to hold tightly to what is good, to try as best as we are able not to respond to evil with evil, but to outdo evil with something that is stronger, with a love that is more pure and caring and peaceful and honest, as long as we possibly can.

I believe that Martin Luther King, Jr. thought along the same lines as Paul's words to the Romans. Dr. King took evil as seriously as any of our spiritual and social leaders of the twentieth century. He wanted his listeners and the American people to understand how evil is more present in our community than we often recognize. He believed *that evil existed in the homes of people who did nothing to bring about equal rights and justice*. He taught that evil and passivity have a symbiotic relationship—one can't thrive without the other. He preached that the more we ignore evil, the greater damage it can do. He believed that we needed to be aware of the roots of evil,

to look out for the places where it creeps into the daily lives of ordinary people.

We can clearly see evil in concentration camps and bombings and genocide and white supremacist rallies. We see evil on a schoolyard where an older child beats up on a smaller child. We see evil when people in authority abuse their power by abusing others. Stopping this kind of evil is vitally important to the wellbeing of all people, but it is also important to recognize that evil doesn't *begin* in these places that make the news. These places are where we see the final results. Evil is often conceived in much quieter places, by people who, at one point, might never have dreamed that they could participate in such atrocities.

Robert Lifton, an American psychiatrist, spent years studying the Holocaust, specifically the psychology of doctors at Auschwitz and their role in supervising the deaths of innocent people.⁶ He felt a burden to understand the perpetrators, especially those who had originally chosen to work in a field dedicated to helping others. Lifton interviewed 28 physicians during the late 1970's. After finishing his research, one Auschwitz survivor asked him, "*Were they beasts when they did what they did? Or were they human beings?*"

Lifton's answer was, "They were and are men.... Most of the doctors were very ordinary. Neither brilliant nor stupid, neither inherently evil nor particularly ethically sensitive, they were by no means the demonic figures—lusting to kill—people have often thought them to be." These were doctors who, after many small steps, somehow began to believe that their role in killing was done in the name of healing a larger society. They went from obeying orders to seeing their role as something positive for society.

After finishing his research and his years spent studying these horrific events, Lifton writes this:

It was in those sitting rooms [talking to these doctors], that I did a great part of the research. Trying to truly understand required me to view these medical perpetrators, whatever their relationship to evil, as human beings and nothing else. That meant requiring of myself a form of empathy for Nazi doctors: I had to imagine my way into their situation, not to exonerate but to seek knowledge of human susceptibility to evil.

The evil that we need to be aware of is not the kind that happens overnight. On a faith survey that we used in our church, there was a question about evil, and one of the optional answers was, "evil is tricky, hard to identify." I promise, there were no right and wrong answers on that quiz, but the more time I spend with the subject, the more that specific answer appeals to me.

While Dr. King spoke about the seriousness of evil, he worked hard not to be overcome by evil. He did not shy away from talking about it, praying against it, or preaching about it. He hated evil; there is no doubt about that. But at the same time he believed that evil could be overcome by good. He believed "that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word." He believed that, even when what is right seems absent or defeated in the moment, *good* will *always* be stronger than the most powerful evil.

Paul's words provide this measure of encouragement as well. There is incredible

good in this world, and we are a part of it. We must never stop rejoicing in the “fact that we are created in the image of God, and we share in the full dignity of creation.”⁷ All the evil in the world--none of it can overpower the goodness in the God who created us and cares for us. As we think about evil in this world, may we recognize it enough to hate and resist it with our words and our actions. And may we find the strength with the help of the faithful in our lives to overcome evil by letting the love of God dwell so deeply within us that we cannot help but cling to all that is good.

Notes

- 1 Fred B. Craddock, *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 152-153.
- 2 Gregory Jones, “Evil and Good Friday,” *The Christian Century*, (April 12, 2000).
- 3 <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/chi-20120827-top-superhero-movies-pictures,0,7443940.photogallery>
- 4 Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, “The Bible and Evil,” (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishing, 1996), 246.
- 5 C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York, NY: Touchstone Publishing, 1996), 54.
- 6 Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, (Basic Books, 2000), introduction.
- 7 Gomes, 248.