

2005-3-20 On Evil

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Opening Words

We are here

on the first day of Spring

to celebrate life, to weigh the difficult

in our own hands, and then lift up our hearts

to praise the sublime, and to give thanks

for our lives together as we link our struggles

to the vision of peaceful community. So we say:

**Living our lives with purpose and gratitude,
moved by the beauty of the world
and claiming justice for all who live upon it,
we open our hearts to greater loving,
healthier knowledge, deeper compassion
and hope of peace.**

Sequence

And so now comes the spring.

The wild geese return home as once they left
for warmer climes. Bluebirds chirp in greening grass.

Everything returns at last.

It is a circle, after all, not a line.

The crocuses and paper-whites
are rising through the dark soil
like prophecies written in the scripture of the earth,
prophecies of summer picnics by a lake
or tag in a sweltering back yard,
with slices of red watermelon on the picnic table.

For it is a circle, after all, not a line.

The spring comes at last, a preface just now,
not the whole book, a bud, a tiny shoot.

But it comes soon enough full circle.

Sure, we know,

Leaves will burn red again after they glow green.
They will be dragged off their branches by ice
again too, once they have curled crisp.
We know it. We are not fools.
Everything comes back again. The geese. The crocuses. The bluebirds.
And the other seasons, too: they will circle back in good time, as well...for it
is a circle and not a line.
But now comes the spring. Poised and ready.
Its own season, neither a prelude to summer,
or a respite from winter,
but its own self, its own time,
its own budding joy.
Praise for this moment,
this bit of new spring silence,
this pause of peace which calls forth new buds,
from the earth, and maybe even from our hearts.
For it's a circle after all, not a line.

silence

And now comes the spring,
with its memories of springs past,
and all the slanting sunlight of March
which brings up memories in our flesh and heart.
For it is all a circle after all, not a line.
Now, in this time made sacred by our attention,
we bring forth the visions
of those whom the season makes plain in us,
those whose love quickens us,
and those whom we love and miss.
We speak their names aloud,
or we see them silently in that place
which buds *inside* us
much like the spring blossoms
open quietly *outside* of us.

naming

And now comes the spring, in the form of music which blossoms for our joy and amazement.

Reading

The First Reading comes from the Gospel of Luke, written by an anonymous author called in Greek Loukas, sometime before the turn of the first century. This is his whole passion narrative, with all parts removed which the Jesus Seminar, as well as my most trusted New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, consider unhistorical,

After supper, he left the city, and took his usual route over to Olive Grove Mountain. His students walked behind him. When he arrived at his usual place, he spoke to them. And while he was still speaking, a company appeared who took him under arrest. They marched him off to Pilate, the Governor. When the day came, Pilate offered his ruling, and handed Jesus over to be crucified. As they marched him away, along with two other criminals, a huge crowd followed, including women who mourned and lamented for him. And when they reached the area called “The Skull,” they crucified him. And the sign hanging over him mocked, “This is the Emperor of the Judeans.” It was around noon, but by mid-afternoon, Jesus breathed his last.

The Second Reading comes from Julia Vinograd, a remarkable Berkeley California poet who walks the streets of the city visibly every day, taking it all in and then condensing it into her strong verse.

THE HOMELESS ARE OUR DIRTY UNDERWEAR

We’ve got to get the tired men
pushing broken shopping carts,
the waddling bag ladies
with plastic flowered raincoats,
and the skinny young kids spare-changing dogfood for their dog and all her
nuzzling puppies *off the street.*

Off the street before the bombs fall.
I can't explain the connection
But I remember:
"Suppose you were run over by a truck
and when they undressed you in the morgue
and you were wearing that dirty underwear
in front of everyone
wouldn't you just die of shame?"
So when the bombs fall
Everyone must be wearing clean underwear,
Good clothing, looking well fed
And happily married in houses with gardens
And swings for the children
Even when it isn't true,
Hell, especially when it isn't true.
It's a matter of patriotism.
We have to suffer to look good enough for death, like dressing for a job.
The homeless weren't American enough to live
And they're certainly not American enough to die. They're such an
embarrassment.
Suppose the world ends,
And there's still broken shopping carts
In ruined cities?
Suppose the broken shopping carts never go away?

Sermon

Last summer, I was visiting my friends Matthew and Kip in Minneapolis. Matthew, who is one of the most playful people I have ever met, came up to me with one of his famous grins and said
"Hey Mark, you wanna help me do something REALLY evil?"

“REALLY evil?” I asked. “Well, er, of course.”

“My beloved older sister is turning 60 this year,” he said. “So I am asking all of my friends, and everyone I know in various states or countries to send her a post card in the next month or so. A postcard of a sunset. You don’t sign it, of course. You just send the blank postcard of the sunset. That’s it. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“It sounds evil, is what it sounds like.” I said.

“But of course, how can I miss out on the fun? Give me her address and I will send a postcard of the sun setting over Columbus. But,” I added with mock menace in my voice, “if you even *think* of doing the same thing to me when I turn 60, you will be in *deep* trouble.”

Now here, right off the bat, you get a sense of how strange and difficult this word “evil” is.

No one could possibly think that what Matthew wanted to do was on a par with Pol Pot wiping out the entire middle class of Cambodia, yet, the word “evil,” in English, can be used in this more benign, almost humorous way, and is all the time. Maybe even some of *you* have used it that way:

“This is a truly *evil* piece of chocolate cake.”

“You know, that Tennessee Williams play we saw last night was positively *evil*, it was so good.” or “What an *evil* sense of humor she has!”

Matthew’s postcard blitz, of course, while humorous, is not funny like a word-play or some classic joke about a priest, minister and rabbi on the golf course. Like many of our more successful stand-up comedians, Matthew’s humor cleverly plays on human anxieties; in this case, he is drawing on the unspoken fears and uncertainties that often accompany the aging process.

Now, of course, when our elected officials or political pundits speak of “evil” these days, they are not speaking with uncertainty, but rather, with rather apparent certainty. Take Ann Coulter, the conservative essayist, for example. On March 8th, 2001, she wrote: “*While having dinner recently with John Lott, author of 'More Guns, Less Crime,' one of life's enduring debates came up:*

Are liberals evil or just stupid? I was surprised to discover that Lott disputed those of us staking out the evil position.”

Now of course, I have heard plenty of people claiming the liberal label for themselves to dismiss Ann Coulter herself as evil. And Mr. Wolfowitz. And Mr. Limbaugh. And many others on a list longer than my arm. God knows I have tossed off that term with bitter rancor myself now and then at a few folks. And I am willing to wager significant bucks that at least one person will come through the line this morning and whisper to me “Have you ever *seen* her books? Ann Coulter *is* the bona fide devil. She is evil personified.”

Here you have the second difficult issue associated with the word “evil.” The whole issue can easily reduce itself to the silly binary argument “You’re evil. No I’m not. *You’re* evil. No I’m not, *you’re* evil. No, *you* are. No *you* are.” This gets us nowhere.

Psychologists Baumeister and Vohs suggest that this mutual blame even exists when there is a clear victim and clear perpetrator. We understand that any victim clearly can blame the attacker. No problem there. But you may be surprised to find out that the attacker often blames the victim first. The psychologists put it this way, quoting an actual attacker: “OK, I shouldn’t have hit her, but she shouldn’t have called me an idiot.” They analyze this statement like this: “People rarely attack for no reason. Many studies have shown that the perpetrators perceive *themselves* as under attack, or as having been provoked. In many cases, a violent crime follows on the heels of an escalating exchange, in which both parties are initially insulting to each other, and it is almost meaningless to ask, ‘Who started it?’” See how difficult this gets?

Here’s the third difficulty with this word. I once saw a film called *Oxygen*, starring Oscar winner, Adrian Brody. In the film, Brody plays a sadistic sociopath who buries a woman alive, and then brags about his deed with a totally obnoxious swagger to her husband. Since Brody is a consummate actor, and since the screenplay writer was skillful in wringing every bit of pathos out of this horrifying plot, I found myself sitting in front of the screen with a growing desire to see this evil psychopath die. Me, who fiercely stands against the death penalty, wanted this character to die, and die while I was watching. I really got caught up in the emotional need to punish this smirking,

superior man. I wondered after it was over if the film may even have been made to reveal just that: how evil inclinations, inclinations to hurt and harm, lie just barely below the surface of an ordinary person like me who thinks of himself as basically good. But then, I assure you, no one in this room, not one - describes himself or herself as basically evil. We all think we're basically good.

I used to work with psychopathic children in a mental hospital, children who were much like the character Brody played in the film. Children with absolutely no sense of conscience or remorse. I didn't even believe that such a thing could be true at first, and I fought against it with my whole being. It was difficult work, some of the most challenging in my life.

But I learned something important doing that work. Sociopathy is not a character flaw. Nor does it result from foolish choices, or a weak will, or even some monstrous family history. It appears to be a serious brain disorder resistant to any repair. I for one do not describe brain disorders as evil anymore than I describe cancer or diabetes as evil. But, you ask, can't a sociopath commit crimes of violence that might be *called* evil? Sure. And they have. The movie I saw was fiction, but it was not untrue in its depictions. There is no good to be found in burying someone alive. Does that mean that a person with a brain disorder *is* evil? I do not think that makes any sense, personally, although I agree that the safe integration of sociopaths into society is not an easy issue by any means.

No, I am not likely to talk about individuals who are deranged as morally evil. But, I think the word *evil* refers to something real. Nothing I can point out to you with my finger, like a devil, or capture under glass, or put into a cage. For me, evil clearly has to do with destruction and violence directed toward both body and soul, if you will. Evil is a human concept, and refers to human violence. Thus, for me, a tornado is not evil. An earthquake is not evil. A flood is not evil. And while sick individuals can perpetrate violence and evil acts, I rarely think of individuals as evil, especially when *removed* from their social context. Evil, I have come to believe, is most often something I associate with systems, not individuals. Patterns, not persons.

But, the reason these systems cause such mayhem has to do with individual human beings *who choose to remain unconscious of what is around them, or how a particular system affects others.*

For example, when soldiers came back from the Second World War, the special government bills enabled many young veterans to purchase a home for the very first time. Unless, unfortunately, they had African roots. The banking and housing systems in the United States made sure that money to buy a new home in the burbs went *only* to people with European backgrounds. Unable to buy homes in the new suburbs being built around our major cities, African American veterans returned to the central cities where so-called “urban renewal projects” demolished whole city blocks without providing many, if any in some cities, new homes. The present urban ghetto was born not of the personal spitting passions of KKK bigots, but of the *unconscious* and terribly destructive systems woven and allowed by good “white people” in our post-war society.

Thus, these evils were systemic, not personal. Now don’t get me wrong. Individuals who are not sick can be involved in violence. Their fragile ego...or their tremendous ego... may be bruised, so they lash back when their ego is challenged. Or they want something so bad, they go after it no matter how much they hurt people. But, still, in every case, individuals are parts of systems first; they are individuals second. Why, for example, does anyone need any product that bad? What pressures do families, cultures and media place on individuals to create their “needs?”

Then there is the famous issue that evil can sometimes disguise itself as ordinary life. No horns. No whips. Ordinary. When I was in seminary, everyone claimed to be reading Hannah Arendt’s famous book where she studied the cruel Nazi, Adolf Eichmann. Everyone could quote her famous line “the banality of evil” which she used to refer to the apparent sweetness of this man...with his grandchildren climbing into his lap, laughing at their wonderful granddad’s harmless antics. But of his own work in arranging the deaths of millions of Jews, he said with complete finality, “In the end, I regret nothing.” Doesn’t seem terribly banal to me. The prejudice of his upbringing, and the unconscious juggernaut of the Nazi system, combined to make a man loveable to his grandchildren *and* deadly to a whole population

of human beings he did not even consider human. Evil only *appears* banal...in fact, banality is most often just an illusion.

Let me give you a few diverse examples of things I consider to show the face of evil in our common world, systemic evil. These statistics were compiled by Jessica Williams, and cross checked by a variety of reliable sources.

1. More than 12,000 women are killed each year in Russia as a result of domestic violence. The numbers in other nations are equally horrific.
2. Eighty-one percent of all the world's executions take place in just three countries, one of which is our own.
3. There are 300,000 prisoners of conscience in the world. There are the same number of children fighting in armed conflicts around the world.
4. There are over 27,000,000 slaves in the world today. You heard me, slaves. Call it bonded labor if you wish, but I am also talking about good old fashioned chattel slavery. 27,000,000!
5. Americans throw out 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour. This would be enough to build a highway all the way to the moon in about a year.
6. Children living in poverty are three times more likely to suffer a mental illness than children from wealthy families.
7. Every day, one in five of the world's population, some 800 million people, go to bed hungry.
8. A famous American golfer, Tiger Woods, earns \$148 *every second*. The average cow in Europe is subsidized by \$2.50 per day, which is more than what 75 % of all Africans live on.

Systemic inequalities of income, access and respect are responsible for most of the world's systemic evils, in my estimation. And the first step to any solution that fights those evils is consciousness of what is really happening. When evils are invisible, or when we can easily be distracted from noticing that they are real, then the systemic ills of the world will have the final say.

Today is called Palm Sunday in many Christian congregations. On this Sunday, a story is read which speaks of Jesus entering into the splendid Temple built by King Herod in Jerusalem. The Galilean teacher did something there. From the evidence we have, the scholars I most respect today would say he cried out against the systemic inequalities he found in that place. He cried out against the colonized ranking priests of the shrine cooperating with the

colonizing Roman army to suppress, with a combination of taxes and violence, any broad justice or equity in the city. “This temple needs to be razed to the ground” is apparently what he tried to say. He may have turned over a few tables to make his point.

But Jesus was, sadly for him, right in his analysis. According to John Dominic Crossan, the New Testament scholar I most respect and trust, the well-oiled machinery of systemic violence which Jesus criticized crushed him in its gears within the week of his temple event. The Roman governor Pilatus and ranking prelate Yosef Kaiapha had a long term standing agreement...anyone who criticized the system was to be summarily dispatched as soon as possible. No trials. No trumped up charges. No dramatic dialogues “What is truth?” like the later and much edited gospels report. Just the famously cruel governor Pilatus sitting on his seat without any fuss, saying “Ibit ad crucem” (Off to the cross with you!) and quickly signing the death warrant over his morning coffee and New York Times. And then, several hours of bitter torture for a nobody Galilean peasant who somehow, correctly, believed in accountability.

Thus, the Western Christian tradition began with an event I can easily call *evil*...the physical torture and slaying of a human being who challenged the system. But within a hundred years, the systemic nature of evil was denied by the churches, as they developed early forms of the “blame theory of evil” that has dominated and bitterly corrupted Western history. “The Jews did it” came first, and so they made up the fiction of Pilate washing his hands to prove he was innocent. And later, “The devil did it. He infested women and made them into witches, and seduced people into becoming heretics, Socinians and Unitarians.” And still later “The Muslims did it. Their Qu’ran *told* those guys to fly into buildings.”

But here’s my point this morning. Mindfulness actually matters. Consciousness of evil is the only first step I can think of that begins to turn evil around. No one I know, including especially me, is exempted from the *unconscious* but powerful network of systems which divide an inherently equal humanity into the haves and have nots, the oppressors and the oppressed. And therefore consciousness raising has to be a deliberate and daily practice.

A famous psychologist named Milgram created a series of experiments last century where he arbitrarily gave one group of people power over another arbitrarily chosen group of people. The first set were *guards*, the second, *prisoners*.

Many were shocked by the ease with which ordinarily good people, when given absolute authority, turned into sadists, giving their fellow human beings electric shocks, and obeying orders from above without question. After Milgram's experiments, some went so far as to say "Auschwitz is now officially explained. The whole issue of evil is tied up with a culture of obedience. Good people perpetrated the evil of killing other good people because obedience was held up as the highest virtue."

Actually, this explanation is way too simple. After all, some people who *refused* to perpetrate such evils were raised in the *same* "culture of obedience." Why did they not go along with the evil?

Modern psychologists have found out what Julia Vinograd outlined so carefully in her ruefully humorous poem. It's not just obedience which moves people toward evil acts, but the presence of *shame* in their lives. Not guilt, mind you. This will surprise some of you, perhaps, but guilt, it has been shown, often *reduces* the likelihood of evil actions in the world; bunched up shame seems to increase it. So Julia Vinograd, in her poem, indicts the power of shame in both the lives of the homeless and in the lives of people with homes.

And she also supports me in my focus on consciousness as one of the necessary steps to confronting evil on this earth. If I don't notice the homeless situation, or if I simply hide behind my shame about it...her precise line is "They're such an embarrassment..." then evil will have its way in our generation as much as it did in the days of Jesus. Consciousness and mindfulness first... strategy second, blaming and finger pointing, never. Never. Never.

And what about my friend Matthew's sister with her lap full of sunset postcards? Her birthday came and went and she never got what was happening. Never understood it as an "evil" little joke. She just assumed that all of her friends were having good times in faraway cities. She was genuinely

surprised when Matthew told her the story. Maybe someday such kind
innocence
will fill the world, and the homeless will be in homes. But until that
day...consciousness, mindfulness and attention for us all. Please.

And once you are moving toward mindfulness and consciousness, I assure
you, you will know exactly what to do next.

Offertory

Prayer for this House

I pray for this house.

Not that its roof never leak...that's not possible.

But that its powerful spirit never leak away
during all of the generations to come. That's possible.

I pray for this house.

Not that you and I and everyone remain here together for a hundred
years...that's not possible. But I pray that all who do gather here over the
years love this place more and more all the time with a generous and
understanding heart. That's possible.

I pray for this house.

Not that there might always be only joy here,
that's not possible;

but I pray that any troubles that live amidst our joys are never given the power
to take away

the gladness, and the thanksgiving which make
of this place both a power and source of solace.

That's possible.

I pray for this place, and for all that is possible.

Every day.

With all my heart.

Amen.