

Good and Evil and All Points Between

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, June 10, 2012.
The Second Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Mark 3:20-35.*

I don't know how closely you listened to these texts today—the lesson from Genesis, the passage from Mark's gospel. By and large, just to be clear, neither is exactly brimming with happy news. I grappled with them all week, living with the mythic account of Adam and Eve learning of their nakedness, an awareness that had come upon them as a result of their terrible sin. In the process I recalled having an anxiety dream—some version of which I understand is familiar to most people—which involves showing up somewhere if not naked at least grossly underdressed. I sincerely hope that it is true that this is a very common dream. If not, I have desperately over-shared, and I take it back.

I also remembered how hilarious I found the question as a kid when I first heard this passage, "Who told thee that thou were naked," spoken only and forever in a Monty Python accent. Nakedness was not something we talked a great deal about. Period. And hearing it in church made it almost more salacious and titillating than I could endure. And if that were not enough sermon fodder, I, having just returned from a trip to see my family, also considered the conclusion by Jesus' family that he was perhaps a tad nuts—this just before he essentially pronounced, or seemed to, the relative unimportance of familial ties: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Arguably this was not when he founded, as many claim he did, the "family values" movement. And finally I pondered anew this notion that there *is* an unforgivable sin—the "blaspheming of the Holy Spirit," the narrator calls it—wondering what on earth that really could mean and how to make Mark's claim work without having to ditch my strongly held universalism, the conviction that no one exists beyond the ultimate redemption of God.

As the week ended, it was time either to make some sense of these passages or to punt, an option in sermonizing that should never be outright rejected. At any rate, what follows is my best montage of these two possible approaches.

When we baptize children, we ask parents and godparents if they "renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God and the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God." Often a godparent or two (and maybe even the occasional parent who has, shall we say, been away for a while) will seem momentarily shocked—I once had a godmother literally gasp—that we'd be talking about such things while holding a precious little baby, clad either in a generations-old dress or one that cost enough to ensure protection from mentioning such a thing as Satan!

I admit the language sounds a bit archaic or somehow out of context in our services; the revisers of the new Prayer Book, now more than 30 years old, purportedly spent an enormous amount of time arguing about whether it should be toned down a bit, wondering, I suppose, as we do, whether or not we still need to talk about evil or wickedness in the world. It is an ongoing question, though I seriously doubt that anyone in this room questions that there is evil. Fairy tales we hear even as tiny babies include accounts of the struggle between good and evil, leaving an indelible notion in our societal psyche that the struggle exists. That is a little different though from the baptismal covenant's claim that there are spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. Is that church talk or is there indeed the presence of a force or energy in the world that desires us to be separated from God?

First the inevitable disclaimer: who knows? We have thoughts, intuitions, faith statements about such things, but solid incontrovertible evidence—no. We call people who report with much specificity their direct interactions with Satan, "crazy." I suppose I once believed in personified evil—the Devil with a long tail and a sour disposition—but it has been so long I have no active memory of it. But I do believe there is a struggle that occurs in a big and cosmic way, not one that I need ever define with too fine a point, but one which does pit good against evil even if I am unable to be too clear about how it happens.

The temptation is to undertake a long list of the ills in our society to demonstrate what is good and what is bad. The first draft of this sermon contained that list, including some of the worst current examples like Syrian executions, military experience so horrific that suicides among our troops are higher than ever in history, greed around and within us that is wrecking our values. And that was just the start of the list!

But the problem is that no one—neither the preacher nor the hearer—is particularly edified by that approach. It only manages to reinforce what we already believe. I read like a textbook liberal; wind me up and out comes a list of positions that I consider to be good. I spout them almost as automatically as the breath it takes to propel them. I am for this, against that, against this and for that. And beyond a doubt, I believe that I am right about every one of them; otherwise, I would get some new ones. But here is the realization that has slowly dawned on me: even if it were in my power to enact all that I claim as good, the struggle between good and evil would not be settled once and for all in the world or in me. First, there is always the chance that I am wrong about a position or two; and, second, beyond any doubt in the cracks and crannies of my heart there is good that I have not even recognized, let alone begun to excavate for use in the world around me. And there is evil or hardness of heart about which I am presently unaware, a condition that separates me from God. Good positions don't always deliver good people. I have known some peace and justice people who, though by every checklist in the world ought to qualify as my dearest, nearest soul mates, were in fact just mean as yard dogs. And I have known a few people whose politics I could hardly abide who were and are some of the kindest, gentlest and most generous individuals I have ever known. That sort of messes with my head—God is like that, but it is surely the truth.

So the struggle between good and evil isn't about issues alone; it is about transformed hearts, hearts that are turned consistently toward God, not just to be right, not just to triumph in some battle against evil, but to find and know God. Even though this seems hopelessly modest in a world that is as messed up as ours, I believe more and more that the battle between good and evil ultimately is won or lost one human heart at a time, victory coming when a heart turns toward God.

In the end I don't find it particularly helpful to believe in notions like original sin or the one unforgivable sin—or honestly to even think about them too much. I know about sin, which sounds like I am bragging, but I am not; I know it in my own life. Sometimes it's nuanced and part of a large systemic sin, like the power structures that give someone who looks like me, a white male, the edge up over someone who doesn't. Sometimes it's not nuanced at all; it's raw and rough and really unattractive, behavior that I resort to when I am most afraid or threatened, fearful of being rejected or left alone. And what I know or believe I know about sin is the same thing I know about good and evil: our spiritual journeys involve an internal dialogue about it. Will we choose to live like this or will we choose to live like that? That is how we do life: one decision, one choice for good or ill at a time.

So at the end of a week of thinking about this sermon, I have decided these passages are just fine, for they have moved me to get clearer about some things that are really important to me. Isn't it wonderful to think that we have been made in such a way that every decision we make has the potential to move us one step closer to God? God has given us agency to choose, to choose one good possibility at a time to turn more and more to God. That, my brothers and sisters, is good news for us and for the world. And the even better news is that there is rejoicing in the heart of God when we choose to move toward good and that in the wideness of God's mercy, there is no limit to the number of times we are given the opportunity to move toward God, choosing goodness. It may not be all we ever need to know about good and ill, but it is a great start.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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