

Sermon July 30, 2023

[1 Kings 3:5-12; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52]

Is Evil Real?

Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen.

I have to confess that this passage from the Gospel of Matthew is one of my least favorite in the entire New Testament. I also find it somewhat problematic to read about a king who separates good from evil, when we know that there are many kings in history who have been more, it would seem, on the side of evil. Evil, nevertheless, is the common theme of our readings. Therefore, it is the subject of my sermon.

Is evil real? Do you believe in the reality of evil, or in its personification, the devil? Do you find such language helpful, insofar as it points to a reality in our world that cannot be described in any other way? Or do you find such language, as a person living in the 21st century, the kind that makes you wince – when we ask a candidate for example, in baptism, to “renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God”?

If your answer to my question is “Yes, I do believe in the reality of evil, even if the language we use to describe it feels antiquated,” then you may be surprised to find yourself in the company, not only of evangelicals and Biblical fundamentalists, but also contemporary moral, political and legal philosophers. That’s right. While respectable modern scholars, if you will, typically do not believe in exorcisms or evil spirits, they have, since the middle of the 20th century – the bloodiest century in recorded history – recognized the need for a special language to describe the Holocaust; things like terrorist attacks; or, more recently in American culture, mass shootings; atrocities the depravity of which words like “bad” or “wrong,” obviously cannot capture or adequately describe.

So, what is evil? How do we recognize it? And what can we do as individuals, as well as a congregation, to prevent it?

Historically, theologians divide evil into two categories: Natural evil and moral evil. Natural evil refers to suffering or death unrelated to the actions or negligence of human beings. Natural evil, for example, would include earthquakes, congenital birth defects, or country music 😊. Moral evil, on the other hand, refers to the willful commission of an act that brings harm to another person. These examples are more obvious: murder, assault...

Theologians pay attention to natural evil and moral evil, because, of course they create a major problem for faith. We all know the question, don’t we? “How can you believe

in an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God when there is so much suffering and death in the world?" How can you believe in an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God, when for example, 26 to 28,000 children a day die of malnutrition across this world? That is a question that haunts us.

Now I find the distinction here between natural evil and moral evil clarifying, but it has its problems. Why should we assume, for example, that God is all-powerful? Our God, by contrast, is a God who reveals himself in weakness, in suffering, and in shame, the sharpest expression of which is the cross. So why should we even grant the critic the assumption or premise that God is all-powerful, when God has revealed God's self to be the one who suffers, and "is pushed," as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "to the margins of the world on a cross"?

And why, moreover, should we reduce evil to the immoral actions of individuals, murderers, etc., when evil in the Bible clearly has a *social dimension* to it? A social dimension to it. Sure, evil spirits possess individuals in the Gospel stories. And sure, Jesus talks about separating evil individuals from the righteous in our Gospel reading for today. But when the Apostle Paul discusses evil or sin in his letters, he refers to it as a *power, or active force, that invades not simply individuals, but communities*. A power or active force that overtakes the collective by disrupting harmony and turning the members of these communities against each other.

Likewise, when King Solomon asks God for wisdom and discernment in our first reading, (and the word "discernment" simply means to separate out the good from the bad), he implicitly recognizes evil as a power that can disrupt the unity of his people, the chosen ones of Israel.

So, if evil refers not only to immoral actions on the part of individuals, but also to something more like a cancer that grows throughout the body and destroys the host, how can we as members, or cells, within *this* body, the body of Christ, the church, Queen Anne Lutheran Church, not only survive the onslaught of evil, but thrive in spite of it?

The Bible, perhaps not surprisingly, I believe, can help. Evil, we discover, follows a clear trajectory, according to Scripture. First, it enters a community through the door of *fear*. Let me repeat that: it enters a community through the door of fear. When we feel worried or uncertain, or afraid, we become susceptible to speculation about other individuals in our community, which often leads to rumors, gossip, and suspicion. Consider QAnon. It began by drawing on the fear of white people who worry they will lose their place and privilege in American society. Rumors concerning their

“replacement” began circulating, not least of which thanks to the likes of Tucker Carlson, then on Fox News.

Having entered the American community through the door of fear, evil spread by way subsequently of *misinformation*. So, after fear comes misinformation: conspiracy theories abounded, spreading like wildfire across our socio-political landscape. These theories in turn produce *division*, the culmination of which appeared in the form of an insurrection and attempted coup on January 6, 2021.

Evil, we discover, starts small. It “lurks at the door,” as Genesis 4 says; once it enters through the door, however, it takes on a life of its own.

So here’s our question. Here’s *my* question. Here should be *your* question: What can we do about it? How can we prevent evil from dividing, not only the broader country in which we live, but us, as a community of faith, as the body of Christ, as the people of God? Well, I believe there are three things we can do to prevent the entrance and spread of evil in a congregation like Queen Anne Lutheran Church.

First, we can recognize and resist the temptation to pass along rumors, gossip and suspicion when it comes to our life together as a community of faith. In the *Small Catechism* – and our confirmands, one of whom is present, will remember this from confirmation – Martin Luther writes, “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” (Now, of course, this is an example of “practice what you preach, Martin Luther;” he wasn’t always kind to his enemies.) But at our best, we should come to the defense of our neighbor when we hear rumors or gossip; we should speak well of them, Luther says, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light. We should, in other words, be charitable toward one another, and assume the best of intentions.

Next, after confronting suspicion and rumor bred by fear, we can confront misinformation with Christian truth. The Reverend Doyt Conn of Epiphany Episcopal Church here in Seattle explains what I mean. “Because informational truth is increasingly untrustworthy via the Internet,” he writes, “we must subjugate it to a higher truth: human truth, person-to-person truth.”

Truth, in short, is relational. If you hear for example, that “Pastor Dan plans soon to leave the congregation,” or if someone tells you that “Pastor Dan really wants to go back to teaching full time,” I invite you to come to me, person-to-person, and ask me if these things are true. Do you know what I will say? *I* do, because I’ve already been

saying it to people who have been emailing me and asking me these questions. (And anybody who knows me knows that I would *never* go back full time to the absolute hell of grading papers!) But do you know what I will say to these rumors? *Absolutely not!* My commitment to you as a congregation is stronger than ever before. *You* are my family of faith. *You* are my highest priority. For better or worse, you are stuck with me!

Now, the third way to prevent evil from creating conflict in a faith community is by loving one another as God in Christ first loved us. As 1 John 4 says – and this is one of my favorite verses in the entire scripture – “There is no fear in love. But perfect love casts out fear.” Let me repeat that: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”

Or again, as Paul says in our second reading, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.” The love we know from God in Christ, in short, is the answer; an antidote to fear.

Yes, there are different ways of talking about evil: moral evil, natural evil, each with its own merits and deficiencies. Few, however, can match what we learn from the Apostle Paul. When we greet one another, therefore, let us assume the best of our neighbor, and our pastor. Let us lead with kindness and compassion, rather than rumors and misinformation, and let all our actions in relation to one another in this body of Christ be informed by love.

And all God’s people said, “Amen.”