

All Souls Church Unitarian

Covenant Group Guide

February 2016

“Evil”

Evil is only good perverted.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Evil has no substance of its own, but is only the defect, excess, perversion, or corruption of that which has substance.

John Henry Newman

Evil is not to be traced back to the individual but to the collective behavior of humanity.

Reinhold Niebuhr

War is evil, but it is often the lesser evil.

George Orwell

The root of humanly caused evil is not man's animal nature, not territorial aggression, or innate selfishness, but our need to gain self-esteem, deny our mortality, and achieve a heroic self-image. Our desire for the best is the cause of the worst.

Sam Keen, *The Denial of Death*

The Measures Taken

The lazy are slaughtered
the world grows industrious

The sad are slaughtered
the world grows merry

The ugly are slaughtered
the world grows beautiful

The old are slaughtered
the world grows young

The foolish are slaughtered
the world grows wise

The enemies are slaughtered
the world grows friendly

The sick are slaughtered
the world grows healthy

The wicked are slaughtered
the world grows good.

Erich Fried; translated from the German by Michael Hamburger
from *Poems to Live By in Troubling Times*, Joan Murray, ed.

On Good & Evil

And one of the elders of the city said, "Speak to us of Good and Evil."

And he answered:

Of the good in you I can speak, but not of the evil.

For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst?

Verily when good is hungry it seeks food even in dark caves, and when it thirsts, it drinks even of dead waters.

You are good when you are one with yourself.

Yet when you are not one with yourself you are not evil.

For a divided house is not a den of thieves; it is only a divided house.

And a ship without rudder may wander aimlessly among perilous isles yet sink not to the bottom.

You are good when you strive to give of yourself.

Yet you are not evil when you seek gain for yourself.

For when you strive for gain you are but a root that clings to the earth and sucks at her breast.

Surely the fruit cannot say to the root, "Be like me, ripe and full and ever giving of your abundance."

For to the fruit giving is a need, as receiving is a need to the root.

You are good when you are fully awake in your speech,

Yet you are not evil when you sleep while your tongue staggers without purpose.

And even stumbling speech may strengthen a weak tongue.

You are good when you walk to your goal firmly and with bold steps.

Yet you are not evil when you go thither limping.

Even those who limp go not backward.

But you who are strong and swift, see that you do not limp before the lame, deeming it kindness.

You are good in countless ways, and you are not evil when you are not good,

You are only loitering and sluggard.

Pity that the stags cannot teach swiftness to the turtles.

In your longing for your giant self lies your goodness: and that longing is in all of you.

But in some of you that longing is a torrent rushing with might to the sea, carrying the secrets of the hillsides and the songs of the forest.

And in others it is a flat stream that loses itself in angles and bends and lingers before it reaches the shore.

But let not him who longs much say to him who longs little, "Wherefore are you slow and halting?"

For the truly good ask not the naked, "Where is your garment?" nor the houseless, "What has befallen your house?"

Kahlil Gibran, from *The Prophet*

Evil is too close to see clearly. . .

As one commentator put it, on 9/11 the world had a moment of clarity. There, on the TV set, for all to see, was unadulterated, indomitable, raw evil. Moral relativism died at 2000° Fahrenheit.

Evil is too close to us to see clearly; too painful to place a label upon. We feel that perhaps we are callously justifying the horrors that have befallen good people. Perhaps we are rationalizing G-d -- and ourselves -- off the hook. But, on the other hand, without any grasp of what evil is, how can we be expected to fight it?

In Torah the metaphor for evil is darkness. No more than the absence of truth. A void of reality. Like darkness, Evil has no power of its own. From where, then, does it derive the power to cause so much pain in the world? Generally speaking, from us, from our fear of it. That we consider it a "something" worth negotiating.

With every spoonful of worry we foster it, with every glance of trepidation, every concession we make from our lives to acknowledge its threat -- until Evil rises brazenly to attack us with our own instruments.

This theme is repeated throughout the Torah. When the snake approached Eve, the sages explain, she wasn't ready to give it the time of day. In her world, the snake might as well not even exist. So the snake had to say, "Is it true you're not allowed to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" Of course the snake knew this was a lie. But this way, Eve took notice of it. The snake became someone worth answering. And therefore, empowered to make a mess. . . .

These people who wish to bring us down in terror, do they have any power of their own? Do they have resources that can feed a populace? Ideas that can thrust them ahead of our progress? Do they attack us with missiles of their own device and engineering?

No. They have nothing of their own. They were empowered by us through the bizarre machinations of Cold War politics. They wield razor blades bought in our hardware stores, and with them they hijack airplanes we devised to better our standard of life. They strike fear in our hearts with powder stolen from our laboratories. Dust. Knowing full well they cannot infect a nation. But they can get us real scared. And for evil, that is already a victory. Because then, through our fear, evil has become real.

Knowing this is immensely useful. Once we have found evil's secret, we know how to deflate it. The strategy is almost identical, whether it be the evil that sweeps the globe or within your community, or that lies in the darker recesses of your own heart, waiting to terrorize you at any chance.

It is not a simple solution, because we have already nurtured evil to the point that it thrives and grows each day. At the beginning, Adam and Eve could have simply ignored it and it would have eventually dissolved into the sparks of G-dly light they revealed in the Garden. But once Evil has been fed and lives out of its bag, it can never be dealt with so smoothly again.

That is why it is so important today for us to create more light. Even a little light pushes away a lot of darkness. For every shadow of darkness we have seen, we must produce megawatts of blinding light. Just as those possessed by evil did the wild and unreasonable, beyond that which the craziest doomsayer could have predicted, so, too, we must do kindness beyond reason.

excerpted from Senior Editor Rabbi Tzvi Freeman, writing at Chabad.org

The Real Question We Ought to Ask. . .

THE QUESTION WHY there is evil in existence is the same as why there is imperfection, or, in other words, why there is creation at all. We must take it for granted that it could not be otherwise; that creation must be imperfect, must be gradual, and that it is futile to ask the question, Why are we?

But this is the real question we ought to ask: Is this imperfection the final truth, is evil absolute and ultimate? The river has its boundaries, its banks, but is a river all banks? Or are the banks the final facts about the river? Do not these obstructions themselves give its water an onward motion? The towing rope binds a boat, but is the bondage its meaning? Does it not at the same time draw the boat forward?

The current of the world has its boundaries, otherwise it could have no existence, but its purpose is not shown in the boundaries which restrain it, but in its movement, which is towards perfection. The wonder is not that there should be obstacles and sufferings in this world, but that there should be law and order, beauty and joy, goodness and love. The idea of God that man has in his being is the wonder of all wonders. He has felt in the depths of his life that what appears as imperfect is the manifestation of the perfect; just as a man who has an ear for music realizes the perfection of a song, while in fact he is only listening to a succession of notes. Man has found out the great paradox that what is limited is not imprisoned within its limits; it is ever moving, and therewith shedding its finitude every moment. In fact, imperfection is not a negation of perfectness; finitude is not contradictory to infinity: they are but completeness manifested in parts, infinity revealed within bounds.

Rabindranath Tagore, from his essay, "The Problem of Evil"

A Prayer

Lead us, O God, to see a way where there is no path; give us to hear music when our own songs cease; and when the warm touch of life forsakes us and our courage melts away, may we stumble through the darkness unto You.

A. Powell Davies

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do any of the readings particularly speak to you? Do any seem wrongheaded or even dangerous? What does evil mean to you?
2. Does observing or contemplating "evil" or "conflict between good and evil" mean anything to you as you live your life? Are there ways that your understanding of "evil" helps or hurts you to show up in the world in the way that you want to show up?
3. Have you struggled to make sense of evil in your personal life? In the life of your various communities? Are there prayers or practices that you rely on? Are there prayers and practices you might want to cultivate?
4. How does your experience of All Souls relate to your understanding of evil and the role it plays in your life?

Prepared for All Souls Covenant Groups by Mary Beth Hatem