

WHAT ABOUT EVIL?

I would like to add to the formal scripture reading this morning the following passages:

But I say to you: Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also
(Matthew 5:39)

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
(Matthew 6:13)

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. (I Thessalonians 5:15)

You need milk, not solid food; for every one who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:12-14)

Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing. For "He that would love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile; let him turn away from evil and do right; let him seek peace and pursue it." (I Peter 3:9-11, Psalm 34:12-14)

Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. He who does good is of God; he who does evil has not seen God.
(III John 1:11)

And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."
(Revelation 22:10-11)

We just did a quick march through the New Testament, stopping off at nearly every contributing author. Matthew stood in for Mark and Luke, and we left out Jude and James and whoever wrote the pastorals. The whole point of Jude's letter is to encourage the believers to continue in the ways of patience and love despite the provocations of those who are diluting or undermining the church.

But Jude does not give us any easy lines. *“But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.”* (Jude 1:20-21) That’s good stuff, but it doesn’t ring so well out of context. The pastoral epistles are full of the same approach (for example, II Timothy 2:20-26), but they more *assume* the perspective than teach or proclaim it. And I guess you know I never quote James if I can help it. (Though it is reassuring to see that in this, as in all other important matters of Christendom, James does not understand or know what he is talking about. (James 4:7))

Perhaps it’s time to be sure everybody knows what *we* are talking about. Recently I mentioned that we are not a creedal church – that our Statement of Faith is not used as a test of faith like, for example, the Apostles’ Creed is used in the Episcopal church. It is a statement of celebration and is meant to call each of us to full consciousness of our own faith, rather than to impose a set of beliefs upon us. By way of illustration, I mentioned my own problems with the statement that we are to “resist the powers of evil,” when Jesus expressly forbids that very approach.

Creedal or not, Statements of Faith do reflect attitudes and convictions, and this one lame phrase does, in my mind, reflect some of the worst side of the United Church of Christ (UCC) as a denomination. The UCC has, since the time of this Statement of Faith, repeatedly marched off in self-righteous do-goodism – fighting the powers of evil as if it had no awareness of its own evil, and as if it had no biblical understanding of the nature of evil or what it means to go against it. That season is perhaps on the wane in the UCC, just as more and more fundamentalist groups are falling into the same traps. Compared with the biblical standards and even our own high hopes, our denomination has much to learn and to do. But if you get discouraged, you can always compare it to other denominations, because then we start looking terrific.

Much of the rest of our Statement of Faith is glorious, and we can only hope that our denomination is reflecting a lot of that as well. I keep hearing that we are working on a new one. Because it is a Statement of Faith and not a creed, we can look forward to that with eagerness. Hopefully it will be new and fresh, and appropriate to the season and time we are now entering. Hopefully it will not be perfect either, so it can continue to teach us. After all, words only point toward truth. And only “nothing” pleases everyone.

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Back to the sermon. Point number one: The Christian Way of Life is a WAY that does *not* make frontal attacks on evil. It is one of the major stress places between the Christian Faith and the American Way. It is much better (and clearer) if we do not line up against each other on this issue, but we do need to recognize that inwardly we line up against *ourselves* on this subject. We are products of both our culture and our Faith.

Somewhere between the Lone Ranger, Superman, and John Wayne, Americans have the deep conviction that “good” people train until they get strong, and then they beat up anybody who starts to beat up on anybody. You may tell me you got your conviction from a different source, and I was only trying to hint at a tiny portion of where I got mine. The important point is that all of us have deep strains of this sort of conviction inside us. We may even resist it, but part of our inner makeup tells us we should fit this pattern – that is, we should be thinking and behaving in this way if we are decent, good, godly people. World War I and World War II cemented this conviction in reality and sacrifice and historical experience. Time has moved on, but convictions that costly and deep do not change easily. So all of us have that “side” within us.

On the other hand, we also live in a culture that continues to honor, study, worship, and even follow Jesus. And it is not only Jesus but all those who have dedicated and devoted their lives to His WAY over the centuries. So we also have deep convictions about the power of love; about the transforming effect of forgiveness; about how sometimes mercy and caring can change people in deep and lasting ways that fists and bullets cannot match or touch. In other words, we did not just watch John Wayne movies. We also watched *Miracle on 34th Street*. Some of us still skip a heartbeat when we remember the candlesticks in *Les Miserables*. Gandhi and Schweitzer and dozens of others we know more personally still inspire us. And God help us, we keep thinking and wondering and reading about Jesus. So all of us have that “side” in us as well.

Consequently, it is not so relevant to fight each other over these issues. The real fight is going on *inside* each of us. When I was in high school, I had two great goals or dreams for my future: I wanted to be a Marine and then come back and be a Minister, and I wanted to be a Pacifist and then go abroad as a Missionary. It was the bane of my existence. I got so tired of wrestling with it that sometimes I thought I would go wild. Being raised a Quaker brought this conflict to sharper

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focus earlier for me than for some, I suppose. But it has seemed clear to me ever since that every person in our society, male or female, struggles with these two different Ways: OPPOSE EVIL – face it down; back it off; force it to retreat; kill it if it keeps coming. Or GO ON WITH YOUR OWN WAY OF LOVE – do not be sidetracked into fighting with evil; go on loving and creating and forgiving.

What an emotionally charged subject it is! But the real reason for it is that we have not resolved the issue on the inside. If we begin to go with our convictions that evil must be stopped, something within begins to writhe at the thought of the damage we will do or the brutality necessary, and the loving part within us begins to haunt us. And if we begin to go with the love side, then the Marine within us is appalled. Where is our hero's blood? How can we stand apart when so many are being hurt? Has it not always been our destiny to fight the dragons and free the land?

Point number one: The Christian Way of Life is a WAY that does *not* make frontal assaults on evil. Of all the tenets of the Christian Life, this one troubles me the most; it defeats me the most often. I cannot get it and keep it in my behavior pattern or in my mind and attitude and soul on a steady basis. When I feel pushed enough, whether by the City Council or the Planning Commission or a parishioner or a friend or even my wife, my urge is to retaliate, to strike back, to even the score. The Marine is always in there somewhere. For the most part, most of the time we merely distract ourselves by always putting the issue into the “world war” category. What about the person at work who keeps putting you in a bad light because they want the promotion you are after? What about the person who is being too friendly with your mate? Or the child who is getting more and more rebellious until your home life is miserable? Or the customer who keeps trying to leverage you into an impossible position? Or even the driver who tries to cut you off where two lanes merge into one? And what *is* evil, anyway? Is it anything we do not like? Is it anyone who gets in our way – that is, in the way of things coming out like we think they should?

“Do not resist one who is evil.” We will let that stand in for all the passages. It is clear that the Christian Way does not see its purpose as that of fighting evil. Rather, the Christian Way is a WAY of its own. It must expend its time and effort on its own offense: the WAY of obedience to a God of love.

Leonardo da Vinci is said to have commented, “I criticize by creating.” In many ways, that reveals an ultimate principle. To fight evil is like Renoir spending his life telling other painters what’s wrong with their paintings, instead of painting his own. So we are reminded: Do not make it your business to stop evil; make it your business to do good. Jesus’ teachings on the subject are many and telling. An enemy sows weeds among the wheat. Shall we pull up the evil ones? No – leave it to God! You take care of the wheat; God will take care of the evil.

Part of it is that we do not understand the breadth or power of evil. Fighting evil plays into evil’s hands. In order to fight evil, we have to take *the stance* of the good guys – the righteous ones. That’s for novices and the spiritually undeveloped! The sin is pride – evil’s chief ally.

Part of it is that resisting evil increases evil’s power. Anger breeds anger; hatred breeds hatred. And there is no way to fight evil directly without being drawn in to the use of evil’s methods and tools. No matter how good the motive, to fight evil directly increases evil. There are no exceptions.

Jesus is one of the few mortals who ever understood the principles of evil clearly and totally. I know some of it in my head, sometimes, when I am alert. I know it in my heart sometimes, especially right after I have just been suckered in – again. But I keep underestimating evil. I keep thinking I can take a few swings at it in this or that special situation and really help somebody or make an improvement. The Marine in me keeps popping up for another round.

The Prince of Peace went on teaching and living for a Kingdom *in but not of* this world, revealing the Kingdom’s values and methods and purposes. He did not curse Rome or the Jewish government. He did not complain about hardly anything in the world, except the lack of faith sometimes displayed by His followers. He did not start any movements *against* anything, and He refused to join the movements that others were starting. Rather, everything He did and said and lived was *for* the Kingdom. Yet no one ever challenged evil more or threatened its power so dramatically. He criticized by creating – by living a better WAY.

Ultimately, evil was so undone by Jesus’ WAY that it came smoking out of its hole to kill Him – a thing almost never seen in our world. That is, usually evil can cloud the issue, give plausible reasons,

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or at least *confuse* the issue so nobody can figure out what the fight is really about or even how it got started. But this time evil was so provoked – because Jesus would not sucker into its methods – that it finally came out in the open and killed Him illegally, mercilessly, and without any provocation other than evil itself. And Jesus' being on that cross asks the world: "Why? Why are you doing this?" There are stuttered responses, but there is no reply. There *is* no reason. Evil is unmasked. Not just as a power play of humans, but *real evil* is unmasked: the animosity of humanity toward God. And from that day to this, certain humans have looked at that cross and, for them, the great charade has ended. Pride melts within them, and evil is no longer appealing or compelling to them.

Point number one: The Christian Way of Life is a WAY that does *not* make frontal attacks on evil. It does not cooperate with evil either, as frontal attacks on evil inadvertently but inevitably do. Is this not one of the most critical and crucial of all the areas of the Christian Faith? Is this not one of the foundation places where following Jesus – doing it the way He does it – is the difference between living for the Kingdom and abandoning the cause?

Watch Jesus. Watch Him with Herod, for instance. Watch how He does not resist evil directly, but lives *for* God's Kingdom no matter what evil tries or how it threatens. Is this not a place where we can say to ourselves and to each other: *Go thou and do likewise.*