

*Being Honest about Evil*

Lesson: Matthew 18:21-35, Romans 14:1-12

Most of us who are old enough can remember the interruption to our busy lives on the morning of September 11th 10 years ago. We know exactly where we were when we first saw television images or heard radio announcements. The World Trade Center had become a target, and we stopped anything we were doing, to take in the horror of evil and to see what might happen next. Our world did not stop turning, but we felt ourselves spinning into the vortex of fear and chaos. Our world turned upside-down.

It is not often that Evil stops us in our tracks. It take something dramatic. 3500 people need to die on television on the same day. I shutter to confess all the times I have overlooked that many deaths in a day, a week, a month - people dying in hurricanes, children dying of hunger in desperate nations on other continents, children dying of disease with no doctor, people dying with cancer.

What about 3500 people *not* dying, but living everyday with conditions of horror past our imaginations? What about people working like slaves, working as slaves - seven days a week, dawn to dark - working two or more jobs just to buy groceries? What about people who can't find a job because they can't read or don't have an address on a photo ID? What about 3500 outcast and oppressed people - even children - whose lives are so horrific that they wish they could die?

Presbyterians sometimes underline different themes of the faith than other parts of the church. One thing we have done from the beginning is *take Evil seriously*. Calvin said we are all depraved, and John Knox preached it to Kings and commoners. We are warped and twisted. The sin is so consuming that we can be sinners and think we are the good people. We can participate in monstrous Evil and pardon ourselves with some lame excuse like "the end justifies the means." In Texas we have to have the largest prison system in the country. We always do it bigger, if not better.

We Presbyterian like to laugh that you cannot "guilt" a Presbyterian into anything. And frankly, we don't like the sermons that remind us of our sins so much as the sermons that rave about the Evil out there in the world. We nod approvingly at the voices that decry the decline in our culture from the good ole days when it was, ...well, just depraved. We don't read the Bible as much as we ought, but we don't feel more than a tinge of guilt over the Gospel and Epistle lessons today about *not* judging others. We don't judge - at least in general, in theory - except for the exceptions like terrorists or foreigners or those strange people across the street.

When we are true to our Reformed and reforming roots, we Presbyterians are much more focused on God's redeeming our own sinful behaviors than we are on pronouncing judgment on

the wrongs of others. In our better moments, we Presbyterians do well when we apply the Prayer of General Confession to our personal confessing. We know God's enemy is Evil with a capital "E." ...and the enemy is "us." Jesus came to turn us, to turn enemies into friends of God.

Presbyterian do more than *take Evil seriously*. In our better moments *we take on Evil differently*.

There is plenty of evil in the world, but what we Christians do about it is first ask what God is doing about it. We work most effectively when we pick the Evil that troubles God the most (whether or not it troubles anyone else), and we force good on Evil the way that God overcomes Evil.

As a culture, we are more inclined to protect our "interests" in what we have than apply the blessings God has given us in the fight against Evil in the world. That imaginative prayer of St. Francis, those Great End phrases, the concensus of mission we have always had to teach the truth, feed the hungry, heal the broken, and welcome strangers has been the inspiration for our best work since we started to work when we came as religious refugees to this land.

We Presbyterians have been a minority here from the beginning, and we Scots were the strangers. We accepted the hospitality of a religious majority group who disagreed with us on core beliefs. The first presbytery was in Philadelphia because the Pennsylvania Quakers - the Society of Friends - gave us a home. We thought then that worship was an aid to faithfulness, and faithfulness was living a pattern of life that made people think of Jesus when they looked at the work we did. Oddly, we had more in common with Quakers than with our cousins north and south along the coast.

That was a long time ago, and we live "post 9/11." Ten years and several buildings and thousands of lives later, we need to ask ourselves where we Christians and Presbyterians are have been in the fight against Evil. And we need to ask ourselves if we are fighting evil differently, if we are fighting *the way that God is fighting Evil*.

Presbyterians *take on Evil differently* because we know that *the only way Good overcomes Evil is for Grace to overwhelm sin*, ...by telling the truth, feeding the hungry, healing the broken, and welcoming strangers.

We have a truth we need to tell - that Jesus Christ defeated Evil by keeping the faith in the face of a cross. To think that we can do something about evil in the world without it costing us in just plain absurd. If we exhaust ourselves trying to keep life like it was before, we are just fooling ourselves with denial. The way we honor innocent deaths is to live the life of the One we call Lord who was completely innocent and got crucified because he was.

We are called to feed the hungry, heal the broken, and welcome strangers, because those are things that got him in trouble. Christians fight evil best with food. Hunger can make people crazy. Crazy Evil will use hunger to encourage delusions. Hunger takes on lots of forms - physical, emotional and spiritual. When people are beaten and trapped and desperate, the enemy is anyone who ignores them. They will follow the promise of feeding, even if someone is only feeding their hopelessness and anger into terror.

Jesus never walked past someone in a ditch. Jesus never asked whether they were worthy of his help, or agreed with his ideas about God, or if they were his friends or his enemies. He told his followers to turn enemies into friends by curing their craziness with love and help. Hear the Meriwether translation: "Heap coals of the Holy Spirit's fire of divine love on them," Jesus said. "It will drive them sane." Look how many hungry and broken and outcast wound up sitting around Jesus "clothed, and in their right minds." Why doesn't this strategy make more sense to us?

One of the best examples of using Good to conquer Evil started the year I was born - 1946. We had fought a second war, because we had failed to end the first one. We left an enemy beaten and hopeless; and a dog in a corner becomes vicious. We learned our lesson, and in the face of the high cost of our victory and their defeat, the second time around we were smarter. We paid even more for a Marshall Plan for our enemies, and we invented the GI bill and government aid to help our own start a new life. It was a brilliant and different strategy with lots of risk, but we had this commitment to "promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to all" - not just for us, but for our enemies. In a curious way, it was a massive implementation of Jesus command to love our enemies. But we just saw it as a government re-building program to help peace. It was good for the economy. A lot of you in this room can give testimony to the blessing of government assistance when you needed it.

There have been a lot of heart-warming testimonies about love and compassion this week. There are portraits of courage, outreach to children of victims. But so many of our people who have been helped resent helping others if it costs them anything. Presbyterians are honest about Evil in different ways, and ten years into this fight that has cost us dearly our victims are still spiritually hungry, our soldiers are still broken, and our strangers are still enemies.

I pray that the country would start trusting God's way more than fighting about prayer.  
I pray that Christians would remember we can be a conscience to a culture when we live faithfully to the obvious truth our Lord doing his different love in different work.  
I pray that Presbyterians would become the great examples we have been when we have put aside petty - even stupid - internal wars among friends in our own denomination, and take up the real fight with the real Evil God is fighting.

We help God's Grace overwhelm Evil...  
by telling the truth of God's love instead of isolating enemies,  
by feeding the hunger in the world in ways with the rich foods that have made us spiritually fat and lazy and selfish,

by healing the broken in the ditch because they are broken without finding some excuse to reserve our compassion because they are not like us in some silly way that does not matter to God,  
and by welcoming the stranger because we all were once strangers on a boat with other strangers trying to find our way to a place where we could love God with our hearts and carve out a life with our hands - when some people who called themselves Friends instead of Christians acted more like Jesus and called us Friends and took us in.

There is a lot of talk these days about the parts of our national history that were forgotten or left out or keep being mis-told in the textbooks. I've got my own corrections to add to the list. Our religious history has more myth than fact for the most part, - in part because we want desperately to believe that we Christians showed up *in masse* for the sole purpose of creating a "Christian nation" - the "New Israel" - the kingdom of God on earth in the new world. So we celebrate the pilgrims of Massachusetts who became the people who burned witches and banished people who disagreed with their views - even great preachers like Jonathan Edwards and Roger Williams. We tell the story of Virginia, where Presbyterians were barred from voting because you had to own land and you had to be a member of the Church of England to vote.

But for some reason we don't talk much anymore about Philadelphia - I think for the most part because those Quakers were a little strange and welcomed strangers with strange names from places where they had been outcasts and even enemies. ...strangers like the strange Scots Presbyterians and the German Dunkers, the Swiss Amish and Mennonites, the Brethren and the strangest - the Shakers. The Friends welcomed even the people who would admit they had no religion at all. All these people had no reason to argue about beliefs because they had been welcomed in and pledged themselves to live together in peace. They were committed to live truthful lives, to feed the hungry, heal the broken and help the stranger. Oh, they weren't perfect to each other in their own groups sometimes, but they had that larger community-compass that pointed beyond their pettiness and parochialism when they got over-zealous. Most all of them adopted a hymn from the Shakers. Somewhere along the way, it has fallen out of our Presbyterian hymnals.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free.  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be.  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained,  
To bow and to bend we shall not be ashamed.  
To turn, turn will be our delight,  
'Till by turning, turning we come round right.

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It has been ten years since 9/11, and from God's view God's world really isn't all that different from the centuries before. It still needs feeding and healing and welcoming, and telling everyone that God is love and loves everyone. God has always been at work in the world doing those things, like Presbyterians have always said. Sometimes we have forgotten that God welcomes all the help we can give to the work that is most important to God.

It's time we turned to God's work. God wants us to work God's mission God's way, not just talk about being mission-minded. Let's "have done with lesser things." Let's give "heart and mind and soul and strength" "to serve all God's people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love." Then we will say in prayers of thanksgiving ten years from now that we helped God turn things round. We helped God turn the world right-side up.