

Overcoming Evil

Romans 12:9-21

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost/11th October 2020

We have turned to Romans 12 many times over the past couple of weeks. These verses have become an anchor in the many storms raging all around us these days, words to steady us, ground us, but also words to inspire and offer a vision of what the Christian life can and must look like.

Last week, our three guest speakers on World Communion Sunday reflected upon verse 9, “Let love be genuine.” Love comes first; it serves as a kind of umbrella over the rest of the chapter. Love grounds each of the imperatives that follow. Because of love...abhor evil. Because of love...hold fast to what is good. Because of love...love one another with mutual affection. Paul offers us the qualities and characteristics of love, as well as their opposites. Because love is genuine and real in the Christian life, we will inevitably confront with the presence and power of evil.

Now, this is an enormously complex and thorny subject, evil. Philosophically, theologically speaking one can spend many lifetimes trying to make sense of it all and still only scratch the surface. Within the Christian tradition, we have nearly two thousand years of thought on the nature of evil and our understandings are changing all the time, especially in light of the horrors of the last century and the current one. It’s obviously too much for a sermon—or many sermons. And given all that we are living through and experiencing these days it might feel too much for a Sunday morning, too heavy. I hear you. I was reluctant to touch upon this theme, but I felt compelled to do so. As I approached writing this sermon I could feel the resistance building in me...I was a proficient procrastinator on Friday.

But we can’t run. Three times Paul refers to evil in these verses. Verse 9: “...abhor what is evil.” Some translations read “hate what is evil,” but “abhor” is more accurate. Abhor suggests running from or fleeing or moving away from that which makes you shudder. It suggests having a moral revulsion or disgust toward something, in this case, revulsion toward evil. It’s something that we should hold at a distance and avoid. It’s not something that we should cling or cleave to. Instead, we are charged to hold fast to what is good (Rom. 12:9).

Paul is firmly rooted in the Jewish tradition here. The prophet Amos said, “Hate evil and love good” (Amos 5:15). Jewish rabbis said, “Run from evil...and cling to goodness and love.” The *Community Rule* in the Jewish Essene community in Qumran, near contemporaries of Jesus, urged its members to “abstain from all evil and hold fast to all good.” This is known as the Two Ways in Judaism, reflected in these questions: “Which is the good way to which [one] should cleave?” and “Which is the evil way from which [one] should keep [one]self?”¹

In verse 17, Paul warns that we must be wary of getting sucked into evil, of ourselves doing evil as we attempt to respond to evil or defend against evil directed at us. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil...” It’s easy to fall into a trap here and become like the very thing we despise. We become what we hate. The French philosopher and Christian Simone Weil (1909-

1943) speaks to this when she wrote, in 1933, “Never react to evil in such a way as to augment it.”²

And then in 12:21, Paul makes a remarkable demand upon the church: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” This seems to be a very different approach to evil. He doesn’t call us to avoid or run or flee from it. Instead, Paul summons us to respond to or encounter evil. In the face of evil be sure not to be overcome by it, instead—and here’s the shift—Paul commands us to “overcome evil with good.” That’s something every different. Paul tells the church in Thessalonica to do the same, with even stronger words. “See that none of you repays evil for evil,” he says, “but always seek to do good to one another and to all” (1 Thess. 5:15).

In order to abhor evil, not be overcome by it, we have to be able to see it and name it. We need to identify it before we can do good toward it. Now, to be honest, I wish Paul was a little more explicit here. What *is* evil? He generally assumes that his readers already know what it is and isn’t evil. Elsewhere, Paul does refer to the “the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4), by which he meant the Roman Empire.

What is evil? This is where things become complicated. The classic definition of evil in the Christian tradition is associated with Augustine (354-430) in the early 5th century. He said that evil is “the absence of the good.” In his classic work *The City of God*, Augustine wrote, “For evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name evil.” Evil as an absence of good, a *privatio boni*, means that evil is no-thing, that it’s nothing, nothing. It has no substance, unlike goodness which does. Still, for something with no substance or existence, it certainly has a way of showing up everywhere and in everything. Maybe that’s because goodness is in short supply everywhere and in everyone and in everything. And maybe we don’t want to admit this.

I think we all believe that if confronted by evil we would know it and we would know then what to do about it. I’m not sure it’s all that easy. If you as a Christian had lived in Germany in the 1930s do you think you would have been able to see evil spreading like a fungus, like a virus through every corner of the country at all levels of society, including the church?³ Would you have had the moral courage to see it, to call it out, step out from the crowd, and resist it, do something about it? I’m not sure I would have.

I recently saw the latest Terrence Malick film, [A Hidden Life](#), a beautiful, if painful movie—it stayed with me for days—based on the true story of Franz Jägerstätter (1907-1943), a young Roman Catholic farmer who lived in the small village of St. Radegund, in the Austrian Alps.⁴ Jägerstätter was drafted to serve in the German army but refused to take an oath to Hitler. He could not because of his prior oath and commitment to Jesus Christ. Jägerstätter was wealthy, he had a large family; he was respected by his community and almost became mayor. But then the village turned on him when he refused to welcome the Nazis, and they shunned his family. There’s one scene in the film when, frustrated, he shouts at the crowds taunting him, “Why can’t you see the evil all around you?” He went to the village priest, Father Kreutzberg, who wasn’t much help. He said, “You aren’t responsible for their actions,” meaning Nazi Germany. “You have no basis on which to reach a judgment as to the justice or injustice of this war. Your only

responsibility is to your family. Your people.” Jägerstätter, replied, “I don't see things as you do, Father. We can't remain silent in the face of evil. We have to confront it.” And so in love, he confronted it. He refused to take the oath. He was arrested. Sent to Tegel prison in Berlin, where Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was also imprisoned. Jägerstätter was tried for treason and executed in 1943.



Franz Jägerstätter (1907-1943)

No one really knew his story at the time. He wasn't trying to make a public stand. He was trying to live an ordinary life, follow his conscience, and choose the good against evil. The title of the film is taken from George Eliot's, that is Mary Ann Evans' (1819-1880) novel *Middlemarch*. She writes, "...for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." Small acts, faithful acts, agonizing decisions, moving in the direction of the good, whether or not the world or your community or church or family support you. In October 2007, Franz Jägerstätter was declared a martyr, that is a witness of the faith, and beatified by the Roman Catholic Church.

What is evil? How will we know it when we see it? When I was in seminary, I remember being struck by the way theologian John Macquarrie (1919-2007) approached this question, a view that continues to shape my life. For many years the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, Macquarrie's views were informed by something Athanasius (d.373) said, writing from Egypt in the fourth century. Similar to Augustine, Athanasius said, "What is evil is not, but what is good is."⁵ For Athanasius, however, evil should not be identified with nothing or what is not. Evil needs to be understood within the context of creation. God created the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, and brought it into being from nothing. God continues to create the world and sustains creation out of nothing, and creates again and again. God said in Genesis, "Let there be...and there was." When God creates, in love, God is always "letting be." God doesn't hold back, but "lets be," and calls forth being, life itself, creation, people, relationships, furthering human flourishing. God creates by risking the possibility of letting be. That's what love is. That's what love does. If that is what love does, then evil, said Athanasius, is a "lapsing into nothing" or "ceasing to be."⁶ It's an undoing of creation, a reversal of creation. If love is letting-be, then evil is everything that undoes love, it's everything that stands in the way of human flourishing, everything that participates in and strives after the diminishment and annihilation of human life and human flourishing, everything that hinders one from being and becoming fully alive. And we can see and feel this struggle in us, this tension between the two ways. We can see these tendencies within us, if we're honest and willing to see them. In our relationships and communities, in the church. In businesses and corporate structures. And especially in societies, in political parties and affiliations, and wherever laws are being made and enforced.

Using this framework—letting-be versus lapsing into nothing—might be helpful for us, provide a lens to help us see and then name something or someone as evil, to clearly identify it, and call it out for what it is. When it's clearly identified we can choose to make the bold,

courageous, life-giving choices needed to move in the direction of the good, toward that which yields life, human flourishing, that which yields the health and healing of God’s people, of society, even creation itself groaning for redemption (Romans 8:19-23).

Using this framework, we come to see racism and white supremacy for the evil that it is. Then we can decide how to respond, not by trying to defeat evil (that’s impossible, it’s built into creation, and it’s not our job), but by figuring out the good that needs to be done in the face of it and then move toward it. Or consider the ridiculous debate over the use of face masks. We know, science tells us, that face masks save lives—yours, hopefully, and the life of your neighbor. To deny this truth, to make selfish exceptions to these life-saving guidelines, to sow doubt about the science, to willfully encourage people not to wear masks is evil. There’s a whole slew of contemporary issues and ethical questions, on both the macro and micro levels, that we can place into this framework of letting-be or hindering life: voter suppression, health care, climate change, how we vote, how we use our emotional and financial resources, the work that we do, how we spend our time, how we engage in ministry as a church, how we speak to and relate to one another—do we enhance human flourishing or do our choices undermine it?—how we speak to and relate to the person within.

“Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.” Sure, this is heavy. But it doesn’t have to be when we remember that we don’t choose the good by ourselves. The Christian life is life in community, and we draw strength from one another. But greater still is the power at work with us, the Holy Spirit who “equips God’s people with every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17; Hebrews 13:21). So let us pray then and pray earnestly for God to help us in these days to see the evil around us and within us—and to name it. But greater still, may we by God’s grace, pray, persevere in prayer (Rom. 12:12), that God will show us, help us to discover that which is good, and align ourselves with the good. May we pray with persevering prayer for the freedom and courage to choose what is good, to move toward it, to lean with love toward the good, allowing ourselves to be drawn toward it—holding and clinging to the good, all that is kind and faithful and hopeful and true and beautiful and genuine and life-giving.

May it be so!

¹ Cited in Leander Keck, *Romans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 303. The questions of the Two Ways were associated with the Jewish sage Yohanan ben Zakkai (BCE 30-90).

² Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks: Supernatural Knowledge*, first published in 1933.

³ Political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) described evil as a fungus. “It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface.” Cited in Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 301.

⁴ *A Hidden Life*: <https://www.searchlightpictures.com/ahiddenlife/>.

⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation (De Incarnatione)* iv, 5.

⁶ This is John Macquarrie’s translation of Athanasius in *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 255.