

“Coping with Evil”

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The good guys and the bad guys. The heroes and the villains. I run across the idea of evil fairly often in books and stories and in movies. Epic battles of good versus evil and also smallish skirmishes of the good and the no-so-good. There are a couple of things that are usually true in these stories. Something that is evil, often a character or a group of characters, is pretty easy to point at and define. And good typically triumphs over evil in the story, or over the course of a series of stories in the case of a longer series. In a single story of a series, even if the final battle between good and evil is not fought, there is usually some sort of discernible progress in the overall struggle, or at the very least, some significant character development in the protagonist that will ultimately help them defeat the great evil in the story.

Life, as we know, is usually not so clear-cut. While there are certainly some things that seem so deeply wrong as to be called evil, there are far more question marks and things that depend on one’s perspective. There are fiction stories that capture this too, like one of my current favorites *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series where protagonist Lisbeth claims that she is not innocent but that there are different degrees of guilt present. This story messes with our minds even further in that it leaves us with a question mark about who the bad guy is for quite a while without definitely naming him until later in the story.

Probably more importantly, we don’t often find resolution of the tension between the goods and the evils quite so readily in real life, if we even find it at all, however much we might yearn for it. I think this is one reason that I am drawn to stories where that tension is obvious and resolved and why I feel more uneasy when it’s not. To find something that is definitely good and definitely wins is comforting, and one could also see it as an empowerment story – a story that empowers us to believe that it IS possible to make progress overall in struggles against things that aren’t right in the world.

Because so many times and in so many ways that ultimate triumph of good isn’t happening, and we have to find ways to cope with what we believe to be evil in the world just to be able to get through. Defining evil and how we go about naming things as evil would be a whole different talk. Today I’m just going to reflect on what it takes to cope with it.

We each have a variety of strategies to manage the fact that we have to live with the or through the existence of evil actions and events. One of these might be seeking to understand something that is evil, finding whatever meaning we can within a catastrophic event.

Twelve years ago I was an elementary school teacher in Baltimore City. I had just started teaching the first grade and spent my first week of the school year trying to learn the

names of the twenty-five students in my class. Since all of the first graders were being tested for academic placement that week and continually switched around between the different classes, this was definitely a challenge! I started the second week of that school year determined to be as secure as possible with at least everyone's names by the end of the week. Monday came and went. Tuesday initially seemed like just another ordinary day. If you're keeping track of the date here, this was Tuesday, September 11, 2001. About mid-morning, odd announcements started to be made at the school. First a reminder to teachers to not use our cell phones. This was already school policy, so it was confusing and disturbing to hear. Then random students kept being called to the office, too many for placement testing.

Before we knew it the remaining students and teachers in the school were all sitting in the cafeteria because schools had been closed for the day. We still didn't know what was going on. One of the kindergarten teachers repeated that a parent had told her about planes falling out of the sky. After finally being released from work, I spent the rest of the day staring at images that will forever be imprinted in my mind, of the towers, of the Pentagon, of the plane hitting the second tower, and the aftermath.

That day and for some afterwards I was in shock. I think most of the country was. At that moment nothing about what had happened made sense. It seemed so far outside of what was believable that it didn't seem real at all. I asked "why" but at first it simply meant "I can't believe this is real. Is it?" I reached out to those around me and found my own shock and fear mirrored in them as well.

As the days and then weeks progressed, the "why" I was asking took on a different form. I wanted to know why it had happened, to understanding some of the forces at work. Disagreeing with policies and decisions spurred by that day provoked me further in my quest for understanding it. I read everything that I could get my hands on about it. News reports, articles, books, the 9/11 commission report, everything. I wanted to know who was involved with what had happened, and who wasn't. I wanted to be able to find some explanation for it, at least one that I could come to terms with. I think most of all I didn't want to be afraid and act from that fear, and for me uncertainty breeds fear more than anything else.

Seeking meaning and understanding for acts of evil in the world is one of the ways that we seek to cope with them. After the events of 9/11, I sought to understand them. After the shooting in Newtown this past fall, we came to church with that deeply in our minds and hearts. We supported the tender and hurting parts of each other, and parts that had to acknowledge that something awful had happened. And we also gave each other space to talk about why it had happened. I have many conversations even now about it, both naming the horror of it and seeking ways to understand it.

There's another part of coping with evil in the world, and that's not feeling helpless in the face of it. I spend so many days avoiding the evening news (whether online or on television) because that's exactly how I often feel when I hear it – helpless. But I think it's a human need to have ways that we are making a difference, ways that we can take action so that we don't feel helpless. Now, we almost have to be strategic about this. It takes discernment to know where it's worthwhile to place our energy, and where it won't make a difference.

I think of the Serenity Prayer, from a prayer by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and widely adopted in many twelve-step programs:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

This is precious wisdom to remember as feelings of helplessness and despair threaten to take over. There's no way that we can fix even a fraction of everything that is wrong in the world. But there are certainly things that we can do. Our story today reminds us of this, that no matter what our own education or place in society, there are things that we can do. The woman in the story whose name we never discover found ways that she could take action. I love how she said that she discovered that “you don't need too many facts, because they get in your way.”¹ I guess I should probably take note of that, given my own voracious fact-finding expeditions. The woman in the story found small ways that she could act against the larger evil of systemic racism and oppression – she talked with people on the bus to share the facts that she had learned and more importantly her own feelings and concern. Her witness and her story show the possibility for even seemingly small actions to make a difference. She didn't let herself continue to feel helpless; instead she found a way to do something.

What she was acting into is what we might call our HEROIC IMAGINATION. This means imagining that we CAN do something that will in fact make a difference. We have to imagine that it is possible before we ever have the courage to do something about it. Each of us has different spheres of influence and difference connections and abilities – it is up to us individually to imagine what we could do. Maybe it's something that we have direct influence over or are in charge of, or maybe it isn't.

There was a notorious experiment conducted in 1971, the Stanford Prison Experiment.² Much has been written about it ever since. It was intended to study the psychological effects of un-moderated power. A group of healthy young men were randomly assigned to be either

¹ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, pages 127-129.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_prison_experiment; <http://www.prisonexp.org>

prisoners or guards and put into a prison setting to play out their roles for two weeks. The evils that emerged were startling, as the use of power went to places that the study had not imagined and horrific abuses were performed on those in the prisoner role. The study was halted after only 6 days, but it wasn't the leader of the study who halted it. He was caught up in what was happening as well. A graduate student in the research group demanded that the study be aborted. She stood up and took action – I don't know if her demand was unpopular in the moment or not, but it sure made a difference. The study was halted and the tortures that the study had made space for ceased. It was possible for her to make a change happen.

We seek meaning for events and actions that we see as evil in the world, and we counter our own feelings of helplessness by taking action when we can. But there is so much that we cannot directly change. And we have to find a way to not let it overwhelm us. To cope with evil in the world also requires resilience, the personal strength to be able to keep going and to bounce back when some event or feeling beats us down.

Last year when I was a hospital chaplain I served on the hospital's infectious disease service, on the floor of the hospital where the medicine patients who were HIV positive were cared for. The team serving this floor was fantastic and fully realized the precious work that we did there. So many patients talked about the stigma and potential rejection they faced because of their HIV status – oppression that I would name in the category of being evil in some regard. I saw my job as loving them through these experiences while they were in our care. The hospital floor where this unit was located was intentionally a place that was removed from this stigma and oppression. It was a place that was safe for them.

This is one part of nurturing our own resilience, to have a place that is safe from evil and fear in the world, a place where we can take a break from it and not have to worry about facing it while we are there. It is this intention that we are leading into with the hymn we sang today, treasured by many here, the hymn *May Nothing Evil Cross This Door*. We are calling for a space that the evil can't get to and for the strength to withstand the storms that we face.

There was also a lot of laughing and joy on that hospital floor. There were presents and stuffed animals given to the patients for every holiday. And up until nursing uniforms were standardized throughout the hospital, the nursing staff wore colorful scrubs that often rivaled those on pediatric floors. Laughter and humor are a crucial part of resilience and making ourselves stronger to be able to face adversity. We need to laugh, and we feel better for being able to laugh. Some of you may have attended talks or read books by our very own humor expert Paul McGhee. I am excited that plans are in the works to have a small group here this fall based on Paul's program on humor. Laughing and a sense of humor strengthen us and make us more resilient.

There is plenty of fear and evil in the world. But there is also plenty of hope and courage. While we often can't change the evils around us, we can find ways to do what we can and make do when we can't. Action and resilience. May we find ways to support one another, and find the support that we need; to have the courage to act and the strength to get through. May it be so, here in our church, in our community, and wherever you may be. Blessed be.