

## ***Overcoming Evil***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
August 21, 2016  
Text: Romans 12:9-21

Once upon a time, it was easy to figure out who the villains were – in films, in fiction and in real life. When I was a little girl, the Lone Ranger rode a white horse and was always dressed all in white, with the exception of his black eye mask of course! Then there was Zorro. He dressed in black, but that was so he could come and go with ease as he fought each night to save the peasants of California from the greedy patrones. Batman too dressed all in black to blend into the night so he could battle colorful villains of in the midst of a dark and sinister Gotham where it always seemed to be nighttime. Superman dressed more colorfully, as did his villains, but there was never any doubt as to who his enemies were or how vital was their defeat.

Sadly, it is no longer so simple to know who the villains, the bad guys, are. As life became more complicated and frenetic, and our scramble to deal with the pressing realities of life each day consumed more and more of our time and energy, we barely noticed as questionable practices in virtually every aspect of society and in business have become the norm. The common good became a quaint, old-fashioned notion of a by-gone age almost before we realized it. Corporate profits and the need to push them

ever higher slowly and inexorably made their way to the top of the priority list of more and more people in positions of power. Thus do we find ourselves now, trying to make sense of a world becoming ever more violent, ever more fearsome and ourselves ever more fearful. Just who are the good guys and who are the bad guys? Literally, it's just not black and white hats anymore. In literature and in film, even in popular music, the lines between good and evil, right and wrong, have become blurrier and blurrier, muddier and muddier.

To be fair, the great works of literature have always challenged the notion that determining good and evil in a person is easy to do. Shakespeare's tragic characters were always deeply flawed individuals which is what made their stories so powerful. The same is true with more modern fictional characters of literature like the "Great Gatsby" and Sherlock Holmes. Each had elements of their personalities which were at best questionable. And it was the interplay between those good and evil aspects of their personalities that made their stories so compelling. It was, in fact, that tension between good and evil within Hamlet and Macbeth, Gatsby and Holmes, that provided the point of connection between them and us, drawing us more deeply into their stories. These characters remind us that none of us is all good or all evil, but rather a mishmash of both every day. That's what makes living life so challenging for each of us. That's also

what makes the teachings of Jesus so very challenging because Jesus demands that we confront the good and evil residing within us every day, relentlessly.

Of course, most of us don't do this. Most of us don't sit pondering deeply what we do, what we think, what we say to others each day from the perspective of whether it is good or evil, just or unjust, merciful or unmerciful. We just live. We go through each day focusing on getting from one moment to the next, one task to the next, one responsibility to the next, one ache or pain to the next. Life itself just as it unfolds each day is challenging enough without getting caught up in existential questions about good and evil at every turn. The simple reality of our daily lives is that we just don't spend that much time thinking about good and evil and their interplay in our lives. We don't stop to ponder the goodness we radiate to others or the evil we sidestep or overlook or flat-out ignore. And yet, dear friends, that is exactly what Jesus asks us to do. That is exactly what it means to be a Christian, to live a Christian life – to live as one who seeks to follow the path through life Jesus laid out before us.

As some of you are aware, this past week a Community Prayer Vigil for Reconciliation, Healing and Peace took place in Wilcox Park in Westerly on Wednesday. I coordinated that Vigil on behalf of the Clergy Association and it was one of the most challenging things I've ever done professionally. The service itself

was easy to come up with – a prayer vigil essentially moves participants through several different kinds of prayers, each one building on the next. Hopefully all those prayers eventually bring participants to a renewed sense that the world is still a good place, that people are still essentially good, and that hope for a better world is still possible and viable. The goal of such a Vigil is that all those prayers make God’s abiding, endless love for us just a little more tangible. The Prayer Board was an integral part of the service and I encourage you to take a look at it sometime before you leave today. Most of the prayers are what you would expect but some of them might surprise you. Some of them might not even seem like prayers to you. But they were to someone, of that I am sure. All of them reflect the sense that the tension between good and evil feels more real these summer days than it has in a long time. And that, dear friends, is something we need to pay attention to. That is something we need to address. But how?

That’s a question every church, every faith community, is wrestling with. Those of you who attended the Vigil heard that in the prayers offered by an Episcopal layman who has devoted his life in retirement to the pursuit of nothing less than world peace. You heard it in the prayers of a Catholic priest, an Episcopal Curate, a Presbyterian, a Baptist and two Congregational pastors. You heard it in the moment of silence requested by the Quakers. People of faith everywhere are struggling with how we are to

respond to the seemingly relentless onslaught of bad things, bad news, bad people. What are we supposed to do?? Just pray? Is that really enough? Is that the only recourse we have as we witness the daily clash between good and evil?

Well, our good friend the Apostle Paul would say NO! Absolutely not. In fact we have his answer to this very question in the passage we read today from his letter to the ancient church in Rome. “Let love be genuine,” he says. “Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” Interesting here is that Paul actually takes what Jesus taught – that love is the most important thing we need to know about God and about who God wants us to be – and makes it ever clearer. Let love be *genuine*, Paul says. Genuine! Not fake. Not pretending to love someone because you think you’re supposed to. Not being nice to someone so they will do something for you. Let love be genuine! Real, sincere, honest, unbounded, unreserved.

Really? Now just how do we do that?? Paul tells us: “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” Just look at those action words! Pray is there, sure. But so is rejoicing, being patient, contributing, extending. And Paul doesn’t stop there! “Bless those who persecute you ...rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Well, that all does sound like the church, doesn’t it? That sounds like our church! We rejoice

together, we support each other in times of suffering and challenge. We pray, a lot! We contribute. We offer hospitality to friend and stranger alike in extravagant ways. We do this! So, does God expect even more?

Well, the answer to that is a sort of good news, bad news situation. The bad news is that there is more we are supposed to do and it's really, really, *really* hard to do. When we feel wronged, when we feel betrayed by someone close or by the world in general, we are NOT to avenge ourselves. We are to leave that to God. All of it. And we are to do even more than that. If our enemies are hungry, we're supposed to feed them. If they need a drink of water, we're to get it for them. In other words, we are to respond to unkindness with kindness. We are to respond to a mean-spirited person with a loving spirit. We are to offer a helping hand even if, especially if, there's a good chance it will be smacked away. We are to do this precisely because it is so hard to do! You see the good news of this whole situation is that by doing this impossibly difficult thing, we are building ourselves up to be strong in the one thing that will always overcome evil in any of its tricky, hateful, deceitful forms – and that's love. Friends we are to overcome evil with love. We are to build up our love muscles by being kind to everyone, not just the people we like or the people we think deserve it. We are to strengthen our hearts through loving the unlovable, showing mercy when none is warranted,

fighting for justice for all and not just for some. Love when it doesn't make sense is precisely the kind that overcomes evil in a way nothing else can or will.

Paul reminds us we are to remain ever vigilant that we not slip into the temptation of believing that we can overcome evil with more evil. And it is always so tempting! We so want to say something mean back to someone who is mean to us, or especially to someone we love. We want to make that person realize how wrong they are for what they believe, for the cruel things they've said about something important to us. We want them to feel the pain we feel! But, dear friends, that is the one thing we can never do. We can never give into evil no matter how justified it may seem to us to do so in the moment. We have to remain strong in love because evil can only be overcome by love!

Genuine love is what the Apostle Paul challenges us to strive for. This kind of love is only possible when we give the hurt and the anger and the fear back to God. Let God handle it. Trust God to have the long view on the whole situation. Trust God to handle evil, even if we can't see or imagine what that might be when we're hurting or sad or just plain scared. All we need to do in those moments is keep looking for the love, keep looking for the light that will reveal just the next step forward. Just the next step forward. One step toward love, one step in love, is all God asks you to do. Just one step at a time, one moment at a time.

Is evil going to just disappear from the world, washed away in a flood of love in an instant? I wish, but no. That's not going to happen. Evil has too firm a foothold, too many people that believe the ends justify the means and that no one really matters but them, too many people who believe that vengeance and retribution belong to them and not to God. And the thing is, Paul isn't promising that love will eradicate evil. Jesus doesn't promise that either. The sad truth is that human nature being what it is, evil will always have a toe-hold in this world, and probably a whole lot more than that. But it doesn't have to have that toe-hold in us. It doesn't have to goad us to respond in ways that would disappoint Jesus, or ourselves. Overcoming evil? It's a process, not an event, for each one of us, every day. Love, genuine love, unreasonable, impossible love is always the answer when evil stares us in the face. Difficult to do? Absolutely! But, if it was easy anyone could do it. And Jesus just asks us to try. So, how about it? Amen.