

## ***Overcoming Evil***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion

On Labor Day Weekend

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

September 2, 2018

Text: Romans 12:9-21

A common adage in the advertising and marketing business is that “sex sells.” While this is undoubtedly true, I would also argue that “evil sells” nearly as well if not better than sex. Just take a look at the listing of scary movies currently in local movie theatres: *The Predator*, *The Nun*, *The First Purge*, *A Quiet Place*, *Annihilation* and who can forget *Happy Death Day*. I am not a fan of scary movies and have not watched one since seeing *The Blob* when I was a teenager. That being said, I am fairly confident the plot line of all these movies is the same: something or someone evil does something evil scaring folks to death or actually killing them at which time some kind of hero or heroine steps forth to vanquish the evil something or someone somehow.

This is also the same basic plotline of all the Marvel Comic action movies so popular these days: *The Avengers*, *Captain Marvel*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Captain America*, *Iron Man*, etc., etc., etc. In all these movies, the narrative arc remains the same – evil abounds. Unlike the scary movies whose emphasis is on the evil, in the Marvel Comic movies the starting point is theoretically the good, some sort of unlikely hero who becomes a superhero just in time to defeat some evil creature bent on

destroying the world. Important to note here is that whether the starting point is the evil itself or the hero created to defeat the evil, the crux of all these wildly successful movies is evil run amok.

Perhaps this is why it seems like we are becoming desensitized to evil. Sure, there is a hew and cry in the wake of every mass shooting but, no matter how many casualties, nothing changes to address the recurrent problem of evil embedded into our society in the guise of deeply troubled individuals with easy access to guns. And it's not just this issue where evil is front and center, daring us to do something about it. Consider just a few of the headline stories of recent weeks. The Attorney General of Pennsylvania released a scathing report on the reality of over 1000 children being abused at the hands of Catholic priests and nuns for decades with little accountability until now. The saddest part of this story is that the evil actions of a few religious call into question the real goodness of so many exceptionally gifted and loving priests and nuns currently serving in ministry. I cannot imagine their pain when they are automatically lumped in by some with their colleagues guilty of incredible evil. Here the evil literally multiplies itself with one sin leading to another and another, rippling out for generations unseen, unnoticed, slithering around just under the surface of what seems like life as usual.

This notion, of evil deeply embedded and ensnaring innocents within what looks like a traditional community in small

town America, forms the foundation of one of this summer's most compelling television shows. *The Sinner* stars Bill Pullman as Detective Harry Ambrose, a deeply flawed man who is compelled to look behind the obvious to see what drives a seemingly normal person, in this case a 13 year old child, to commit two horrific murders. Simply put, the evil of the actions does not match what Detective Ambrose finds in the culprit, someone who has already confessed to the crime by the time he arrives on scene. He needs to know where and how this evil originated, daring to look far beyond what is visible on the surface. As he digs deeper and deeper into the backgrounds of the ever widening circle of people touched by the evil, he realizes that the murders were not the end of the evil but rather the beginning of its breaking through the surface under which it has been simmering for years. In *The Sinner* evil is always present but rarely visible or understandable or even believable because we don't want what we're seeing to be true. It is a powerful reminder that we are all, every one of us, sinners just waiting to fall into evil's grasp. Yikes!

Soteriology is the study of what theologians call the problem of evil. It's a problem because if we believe that God is all loving and all powerful how can evil even exist in the world? Why doesn't our all powerful, all knowing, all loving God just blot it out, once and for all? You know this feeling. You know what it's like in that moment immediately after something bad happens to

you or someone you love when you find yourself crying out, “why did God let this happen!” People say this all the time. People say it to me and other pastors all the time. To be honest, the answer you will get back depends on the pastor you’re talking to. Some Christian traditions believe that when something bad happens to you it is because somewhere, deep inside you, there is a sin that drew the evil to you like a dog sniffing out a hidden hunk of meat. Confess your sin, turn your life over to Jesus and the problem will resolve itself in some way. You’re not to blame for harboring this hidden sin, by the way, because we are all sinful, all dancing on the precipice of evil every day. But just confess Jesus as Lord and Savior and Jesus will work things out somehow, someway. Too often these same pastors are quick to see evil lurking in anyone who doesn’t agree with their judgment on a whole range of topics. Take Pastor Kevin Swanson, for example. Just a few weeks ago he released a statement saying God was causing California to burn up with wildfires as punishment for its open embrace of the LGBTQI community. Clearly, he and I have very differing perspectives on what the real evil is in this situation.

But this still leaves us with the question of what are *we* to do with the problem of evil in our church, in our faith, in our reality each day? Is God responsible for evil or are we? If God can fix evil, make it go away, why doesn’t God do just that? Well, I am certainly no expert on soteriology from a scholarly perspective. I

can only share with you what I have come to believe over the course of a lifetime and it's actually pretty simple. Evil exists because of people, not God. When God gave humans free will, included in that gift was the power and the responsibility to choose between good and evil, every day, in more situations than we might ever realize or appreciate. Evil resides in humanity and in our natural propensity to be selfish and arrogant. Pushing back against this very human tendency to want to put yourself first all the time is what the practice of religion, the belief that there is something more to the universe than your own thoughts and feelings, is all about. God does not use evil as a punishment. Evil is the punishment we inflict upon ourselves every time we blindly follow our own instincts rather than working to discern God's will for us in any given moment.

This is tough stuff! This is the work of a lifetime! Each of us lives life each day in a world where evil and good exist side by side. Sometimes they masquerade as each other, which only makes things more confusing. This is why the problem of moral relativism, that notion that morals – what's good and bad – are flexible and pliable, changing within the constraints of every given situation, is so rampant today. It mucks up the waters on which we float through life as it proposes reasons why something that seems bad might be good. Allowing the children and families of Flint, Michigan to drink contaminated water for years because the

city could not afford to repair the water system seemed like a good idea when it kept taxes from skyrocketing. Then people started getting sick. People started dying. Evil became visible to some, but still not to all, so the problem remains unresolved. Moral relativism run amok.

So, this is where our good friend the Apostle Paul comes into the conversation with his unique insights into the problem of evil in the world. What he is writing in this text we read this morning is intended as guidance for the people of the church in Rome for how they should live their lives each day as followers of the Risen Christ, as people beloved of God who also love each other. Paul's pretty specific too. "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good," he says, going into much more detail even than this. He urges the people to "love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor; ... be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." All good advice, we think. We can do that, we believe. And hopefully, we can, at least most of the time. But what about evil? How do we respond to that ever present, sneaky evil lurking just out of sight? "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all," Paul urges us. But is that even possible?

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Wow. That can be tough. I'll admit it. When someone is mean or unkind to me, I won't lash out. Of course not. But I will hold on to that grudge. I will nurse

it and massage it, not ready to let it go on its way. Until that is, I realize what it is I am doing, that it could just as easily have been me who did the unkind thing because I wasn't thinking or paying attention. It is then that guilt crashes in on me and I am truly humbled before God as I remember just who I am and who I am not. I am not perfect, not hardly. I can sin just as easily as anyone else. And I do, as do we all. That is who we are. That is what we do. Paul reminds us of that so eloquently in this text, "so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Wow. If only it was that easy. Enter the church.

The church, dear ones, is where we come together to experience what it is to love and be loved, by God and each other. The church is where we come to build up those emotional and spiritual muscles that will allow us to overcome evil with good as Paul urges us to do. The church is where we come to learn the stories of our faith to bolster our own understanding and knowledge of God. The church is where we practice what we learn here about God's unconditional love for each of us and for everyone in the world outside our doors. The church is our primary resource, our tool for learning what it means to overcome evil in the world as individuals and as a community of faith. Can we do this work on our own? After all some say they can worship God in nature by taking a walk on Sunday morning or they say they worship God in their own way on their own time and God

understands that. Of course. God is in nature. God does understand busy lives and competing demands on our time. God also knows that no one can be a Christian alone. No one can be a community of faith by their lonesome. No one can be everything to themselves and the people in their lives on their own. We all need the church and the church needs us. A community is only a community when people come together around a common purpose, a common understanding of the world and how we want to be a part of it. In our church that means extravagant welcome to all and genuine hospitality to all who come through our doors. In our church that means finding ways to work together to be the people God needs us to be in our little corner of the world as individuals and as a church, something we'll be exploring in more depth at our planning meeting and luncheon after worship this morning. I hope you'll make time to join us for this vital work.

Moving forward, here's the thing to consider. It is possible to confront all the challenges of life, all the evil in the world on our own, but why would we. Why do that to ourselves when we have this church, an amazing gift from God filled with incredible people and an exciting, meaningful future. I wonder what God has in mind for us. Don't you? Amen.