

SERMON: RESISTING EVIL (Feb. 12, 2012) Jennifer Ferguson

This past week on the news we watched with horror the continued use of brutality and violence by the Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad against his own people in what will eventually be a fruitless effort to maintain his control and power over them. We also watched in disbelief as a father who was “a person of interest” in the murder of his beautiful wife set his own house on fire, blowing himself up along with his two little sons by dousing his own home with gasoline after axing the little boys to death. We were stunned when he heard the audio recording of the social worker who called 911 when she dropped the boys off for a supervised visit with their father and he blocked her from going through the door with them. The father left a note: it said: “I’m sorry.”

The fact that evil exists is brutally obvious to us. But the question of an all-loving (omnibenevolent) and an all-powerful (omnipotent) God who allows evil to exist is something we have struggled to wrap our heads around for centuries. It is probably the only real question that most religious people wrestle with: why does an all-powerful, all-loving God allow for the suffering of the world?

So today we are going to explore that question of evil and deal with the issue of theodicy which was coined in 1710 by a German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. The word comes from the Greek Theos for “God” and “dike” for “Justice” which brings together the nature of God in the face of evil in the world. Theodicy attempts to resolve the evidential problem of God and reconcile God’s traditional characteristics of omnibenevolence (all loving), omnipotence (all powerful and omniscience (all knowing) with the occurrence of evil.

Augustine argued that evil is a result of human free will and sin. And Irenaeus furthered his argument by stating that evil and suffering are necessary for the full moral development of human beings. He decided that human creation was split into two parts: humans were made in the image of God and have the power to achieve moral perfection in the likeness of God but that humans have free will. To achieve such free will, humans must experience suffering and God must remain at a distance from humanity as we work to develop ourselves as moral agents. God as a hands off approach as we are being tested and refined. John Hick in the twentieth century developed Irenaeus' theory further and argued that the world exists as a "vale of soul-making" and that evil and suffering must therefore occur because human goodness is developed in opposition to them. Later, in Jewish theological circles, much of post-Holocaust theology is committed to a rethinking of God's goodness in connection to the holocaust and likens it to child abuse. If God allows it, God must be an abusive parent over God's own children. The problem with these theodicies is that if we continue to insist as a humanity that God is both all-powerful and all-loving, and so allows evil to exist, then we can give ourselves permission and give ourselves justification for the perpetuation of evil and suffering and watch evil and suffering devour our own people insisting that is it for our ultimate moral achievement. If God allows it, then who are we not to allow it? Like the parent, so the child.

Both Rabbi Harold Kushner and professor Kenneth Cauthen deal with the question of theodicy by arguing that we need to let go of an all-powerful God in favour of an all-loving God because all-loving and the allowance of evil cannot and should not be reconciled. We need to conclude as Cauthen says: "we must accept the power of God as limited in order to

preserve the goodness of God and reluctantly accept the consequences of compromising God's power. We need to come to the conclusion that God does not prevent or overcome some evil because God cannot. Only a suffering, struggling, limited God will do...and that is the God, I believe Jesus revealed on the cross-- a broken God who weeps with us in our suffering, and could not stop his death any more than anyone else. A God who wills the death of even one of his children, is no God I am interested in being in relationship with. I can live with a God who cannot stop evil better than I could love a God who could, but doesn't. Who of us could stand by and watch a child, any child get tortured and do nothing if we could... so why would we think an all-loving God could?

I remember a broken hearted woman coming off the street to ask why God didn't stop her brother-in-law from being crushed by the huge bulldozer he was hauling when it accidentally came loose and rolled over him leaving his grieving widow and four little children behind. I asked her: how can a God who is Spirit, Light, Energy prevent thousands of pounds of physical matter from running over him any more than a beam of light could stop a truck from running over a child on the street. Spirit cannot overpower Matter.

So how can we who live in a world with evil in it? First, I think we need to grapple with it and try to understand it in hopes of helping to alleviate it. We cannot eradicate it entirely because we obviously can't eradicate NATURAL evil like hurricanes and earthquakes even though we can try to attend to climactic changes or prevent accidents from happening or cure diseases. But we can attend to MORAL evil that occurs in us – human beings. Caughen suggests that there are four categories of moral evil:

- 1) **The sinful: which is the wrongful use of freedom that distorts relationships with God and others and has harmful and destructive consequences. (ie) choosing intentionally to do harm to another... (ie) the Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad**
- 2) **The tragic: characterizes suffering to the extent that it is unavoidable and/or irredeemable. (ie) the deranged character of the father or a pedophile who cannot be rehabilitated**
- 3) **The demonic: (and I love how he defines this) the destructive power of the past embodied presently in personality formation and social structures) ie the ghosts of the past revisiting the people and systems impacted by the past that need to be exorcised (ie) pattern of abuse and violence continuing in families for generations and injustices embodied in social economic and political structures**
- 4) **The ambiguous: indicates the mixture of good and evil in events and choices (ie) choosing to terminate the life of a fetus for the good of the life of the mother – it's a mix of good and evil**

These are the kinds of evils that we see in our characters of Macbeth and King Saul in our story this morning. These two Kings share many striking parallels: both men had no intention of rising to power but when 3 witches (in the case of Macbeth) and a prophet by the name of Samuel (in the case of King Saul) prophecy that it is destiny or God's will that they should be made King ,one of Scotland, and one of Israel respectively, we watch their characters deteriorate. They go from being good and obedient young men to unravelling into ambitious and jealous and deranged men murdering those who would replace them as King, Macduff 's sons in the case of Macbeth and the young David in the case of King

Saul. Moreover, in their desperation, as they interpret their destiny or God's blessing as slipping away from them, they seek out more advice from the outside sources that predicted their Kingship in the first place and Macbeth returns to the witches for more foretelling and Saul goes to the Witch of Endor to conjure up the ghost of Samuel for help. Both hear of their ultimate dead and destruction at the hands of violence by their enemies. This drives them further into violence and they go up against their enemies who eventually slaughter them and they are both disgustingly beheaded. Both men lost their heads to their own evil so to speak. What both Macbeth and King Saul don't come to grips with is that they themselves are their own worst enemy: their sins of pride and anger and envy and lust for power is what tragically destroys them. With each choice they make for whatever reasons, human sinfulness, ghosts from the past, and their integrity and character deteriorates until they lose the ability to make good choices resulting in a lot of lives tragically lost including their own.

Scott Peck in his book *People of the Lie* which he wrote to deal as a psychologist with the problem of human evil says that there are 2 kinds of disorders: the person who blames themselves for everything and takes full responsibility for not only their evil but the evil of others --- who thinks "it's all my fault" -- and the person who refuses to accept responsibility for their choices and actions and blames everyone else for what happens -- who looks outside of themselves for the problems. He says: I can work with the first kind of disorder, I cannot work with the person who refuses to acknowledge their own evil.

Scott and God are trying to do the same work. God can't work with us if we blame others for our stuff instead of looking at ourselves. We can have some power over moral evil. If we are to help alleviate evil in the world, we need to begin by acknowledging and examining ourselves and our own motivations. We need to deal with the devil within us – and we all have evil inside...As my supervisor Donovan Brown would say: we need to look at the monster inside regularly and take 'em for a good walk on a short chain so we can keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn't run off on us. Our United church Creed reminds us that when we see evil, we need to resist evil, not give into it, not give it room. Paul in the letter to the Romans reminds us to overcome our own evil within ourselves with good. "Do not overcome evil with evil, overcome evil with good." Jesus took a silent 40 day retreat in the desert to get a handle on his own evil temptations within himself before he tackled ministry. If he'd lived longer than doing 3 years in ministry I figure he would have needed to take another 40 day silent retreat sooner rather than later. We all need to grapple with our own sins, our tragedies, our demons passed down to us from the generations past, our own uncertainties and confusions about what is right and what is wrong. As someone once said: "I have seen the enemy...and it is us." And Jesus reminded us to "love your enemy" especially. We can't chase after the evils in this world, if we haven't dealt first with the evils that are inside our own selves or we will be like Macbeth and Saul chasing after the wrong enemy.

And that's where God's power comes in. Notice we didn't say that God has NO POWER, only that God's power is limited. God still has some power and so do we. God can help us overcome our own evil with God's all powerful love. God does not have the

power to stop the tyrannical Syrian leader or the guilt-ridden distorted father of the two little boys, unless they choose to let God in, until they face their own evil so that it isn't projected onto everyone else and allow the all-powerful love of God infuse their own heart and spirit. The only God worth worshipping and emulating is not a God who must possess unlimited power but mysteriously allows us to suffer for our own good, but as Cauthen says we need to affirm an all-loving God 1) with a broken heart who is present to us in spirit in our sorrow and weeps with us and 2) a God who is with us seeking to use the occasion of our own suffering as an opportunity to bring the good out of that situation and I would add 3) the God who helps us to expose and heal and transform and redeem the evil that is within our own human heart through the power of love 4) a God who gives us the wisdom and courage to discern and resist evil outside of ourselves when we are confronted by it

If Macbeth and King Saul had become friends with THIS God of Love and not a God of Power maybe they would have made different choices and life would have turned out a whole lot differently than it did for them and everyone else around them. If they hadn't been chasing after aspirations or looking for wisdom and answers outside of themselves and been focussed on their own moral character development in the first place maybe their monsters wouldn't have run rampant. If we stop insisting on an ALL-POWERFUL God, instead of the God in Jesus who hangs on a cross because of our sins not for our sins, then we can stop making excuses for wanting to become all-powerful ourselves. For isn't it the work of the faithful -- to be made over in the likeness of the God we hold in our imagination? If we are attentive and allow this ALL-LOVING God to attend to the evil that

is within us and around us, as Cauthen says “we can triumph spiritually over suffering in the midst of suffering, we can change some things for the better within ourselves and outside ourselves, and we can live in the hope that life will be perfected in a realm beyond this world.” Or more simply: “We can transcend the actual (evil), transform the actual (evil) , and live in the hope that the actual (evil) will be ultimately perfected.”

We can illuminate the darkness, if we can fill our own hearts with light. Have you ever noticed when you enter a pitch black room, it only takes one little candle to illuminate a whole room of darkness? Remember the movie Pay It Forward where the little boy tried to pay a little good deed forward but his jealous little friends pulled a knife on him and killed him. When he went up against evil and tried to destroy it, it overcame him and he died. But remember what happened? The night of his death, in the darkness masses of people whose lives he had touched and transformed stood outside his mother’s house each holding little candles illuminating the darkness. A light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. When we light candles inside ourselves to expose the darkness within, we begin to eradicate the darkness and allow the all-loving to God fill our hearts and we add to the light in this world. And one shining person inspires others to shine. May we uphold an all-loving God on Valentine’s Day and every day! Spirit may not be able to stop matter from crushing us. But the God who is Spirit does have the power to influence other spirit. And so may this Spirit of an all-loving God be invited into each of our hearts to transform us and give us the strength and courage and wisdom we need to overcome and resist evil within and without, with the power God’s holy love. May this be our lifetime work. Amen.