

We, in what used to be called “mainline” churches (you know, the one in the town center, or the main street, usually Congregational in New England), have never been really big on talking about Sin, Evil, and the Devil. For some good reasons... Too much emphasis on sin and evil, especially personal sin, and you wind up with “the church that guilt built!” Regarding evil and the devil, I think there is good reason to question whether there is solitary being out there or down there who has maximal power of darkness and death. Many of us enjoyed comedian Flip Wilson (“The Devil made me do it”) and we might easily make fun of someone all dressed in red, surrounded with fire, with horns coming out of his head!) The mainline churches now often call ourselves “progressive” (like “hey, haven’t we moved beyond ancient doctrines, beyond building up church attendance with fear and threat of hell?). We would rather increase the fellowship of those who come because of Love, Love, for God and love for one another.

However, in downplaying sin, evil and the Devil, we in progressive churches may have lost an important part of the faith: that evil is very real (whether or not there is a chief singular devil), and part of our calling is to *resist all that is evil*. You may remember that resisting evil is part of the baptismal, confirmation, and membership vows in our church. The Bible speaks about both a singular Devil or Satan, but also about demons in the plural, demonic forces, like our Gospel reading this morning. We remember that Jesus spoke directly to the spirit of the crazed man, saying “What is your name?” And the response was “We are legion!” (In other words, we are many!) This makes perfect sense to me; if we are dealing with a person walking the roads of sin and evil, one destructive behavior can easily lead to another... one who may start life insulting and bullying, may easily seek any manner of *power over others*, from economic exploitation, to enslaving others, sex-trafficking, lying about others, even striking or killing others.

Let me mention a few other notable Bible verses about *Evil*: the “story” (we could say legend) of Cain and his brother Abel. Cain was angry

and jealous of his brother, and he heard the Lord God saying, “If you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door, its desire is for you... but you must master it.”(Gen4:7) We know that Cain did not master the impulse of sin or evil, and he killed his brother Abel. (That’s where we get the expression “raising Cain.”) A similar notable passage is Luke’s account of the temptation of Jesus, his 40 days in the wilderness, being tempted by “the devil.” Luke says “when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Jesus *until an opportune time*.”(Lk4:13) The idea is similar to the Genesis story, that sin, evil, or the devil is “crouching at the door,” always looking for an opportunity to tempt us or try us.

The fisherman Peter echoes these themes: “Be watchful; your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”(1Peter5:8). Paul famously said to the Ephesian church: Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”(Eph6:11). Jesus himself referred to a singular or chief devil when talking to the scribes and pharisees: “You are of your father the devil; he is a liar and the father of lies.” (Jn8:44)

Suffice it to say that the Bible has many references to evil, and even personified evil. Do we need the Bible to tell us to “Be watchful” about temptation? Can we not say we KNOW the reality of temptation and evil?! And when our gospel story has the demonic spirits in the man say “Our name is Legion,” can we not say that we have seen evil by many forms and many names?!

Just to mention a few: LYING... yes, if Jesus refers to a chief devil as the Father of lies, that is probably an important warning! How we stress to our children that honesty is the best policy! One lie usually leads to another, trying to cover up the first lie with a made-up explanation! How sad that nowadays the news is filled with so many lies, so that we have to “fact-check” seemingly everything. What about BULLYING as a form of evil...It starts in the schoolyard, some evil force (call it simmering anger, an unresolved force, crouching at the door, waiting for an opportunity) that

makes the muscular big boy push and hit the scrawny small boy, make him submit, make him cry uncle, make him give away his lunch money. What about any kind of ABUSE (verbal abuse such as constantly putting others down, or physical abuse such as torture, slavery, mass killings... Evil could be defined as intentional harm, intentional destruction and killing.

It is hard to justify any killing, hard to justify war. And now presidents of Israel and the U.S. are justifying preemptive strikes against Iran. Scholars go to great lengths to describe a “just war.” As far as killing, The only thing that makes sense to me is that IF it is absolutely clear that one’s life is in grave danger, striking and killing may be a justifiable act of self-defense. Was Iran just at the point of attacking Israel? Is nuclear capability, in any country the same as planning an immanent nuclear attack? “Thou shalt not kill” is so clear in the 10 commandments. At the personal level we condemn pre-meditated murder, first degree murder. Could we not think similarly of pre-emptive bombing, since by definition it is not easily justified as an instance of “self-defense?” (It seems a response based upon Fear).

So... what can people of faith do about it? The first and most obvious thing is to RESIST any evil. Moses gave us that example; he saw a fellow Israelite slave being beaten, so he fought back in “justifiable” defense of the victim. Jesus is, of course, our supreme model for resistance, to the powers that be... one who “spoke truth to power.” ... both to the religious leaders, scribes and pharisees, and also to the Roman authorities in his final week of life. Jesus’ resistance was nonviolent of course, and he taught that to his disciples... that if they spoke truth to power they would suffer violence just as he does. We recall that Mahatma Ghandi practiced nonviolent resistance to help gain independence from Great Britain in the 1930’s and 40’s. And of course Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960’s led many nonviolent protests against the evils of slavery and segregation. We have an obligation in our vows of faith to “resist evil,” nonviolently protest against things we see as destructive and wrong.

As followers of Jesus, we teach the nonviolent part all the time, and it starts at the personal level: Use words, not fists. Disagree without being disagreeable. Settle differences with dialogue.

Whether at the personal or societal level, we are called to resist evil (Say Stop it!), but ALSO substitute something new: “counter” the evil with good!!! Paul said that very thing, and was echoing Proverbs(25:21)... “Do not return evil for evil” but respond with goodness “If your enemy is hungry, feed him!” (Rom12:20). Notice that in our gospel story, Jesus not only cast out the legion of demonic spirits from the crazed man, but he won the man over with love and acceptance, so that the man was seen sitting at Jesus’ feet. Jesus, or somebody close by also got the man some clothes, a very practical way of caring for this man.

I think I could conclude by saying: Evil *is* very *Real* (whether we think of it as demonic possession or mental illness. There is of course a place for psychiatric meds, but at many levels of evil, we know we can RESIST evil. (“See something, say something!”) We can practice saying “Stop it!” (Interceding when we see bullying for example)... and we could, in some cases, that seem “demonic” to us, invoke the very Spirit of Jesus: “In the Name of Jesus, stop it!” Then, secondly, we can COUNTER evil, trust that the power of goodness and love is stronger than the power of evil. If one doing cruel destructive things is open, we can begin a conversation, like what did Jesus teach? What would Jesus do? For that matter, What do all the religions teach about loving a neighbor? How about the universal Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And Don’t do to others what you don’t want done to you! And an obvious addition: Don’t let happen to others what you don’t want to happen to you! I think that says it all: Resist and Stop evil, and then if possible, Counter it with Love! Help to Heal, Redeem and Renew others with LOVE. We can pray that this can happen at personal, even international levels. Amen.