

**THE LURE OF THE NIGHT; EPHESIANS 2:1-10; JOHN 3:14-21; 3.22.2009
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“It is the policy of the Devil,” said C.S. Lewis “to persuade us that there is no Devil.” By most measures it looks like the Devil is succeeding.

For example, when we were discussing the cover of this week’s bulletin I hesitated using John 3:19, “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

Most people don’t come to church to hear that we are evil. In fact, many of the most ‘successful’ churches today get this and have eliminated both the cross and confession of sin for fear of offending. How very shrewd of the Devil to get the adherents of a religion based on forgiveness to stop asking for forgiveness. Pretty soon no religion.

Yet, the words on the front of the bulletin come from the lips of Jesus. Former Duke University chaplain, Will Willimon says one of the more challenging ministries of the church is to teach people that we are sinners.

That’s a challenge in any age. But in our time, it’s especially difficult because teaching people they are sinners is blamed for the decline of the mainline church.

Which is not exactly true. Other things have contributed to the decline of the church – but not teaching people that they are flawed human beings. In fact, one pastor of a rapidly growing, mostly young adult church attributes the growth of his congregation to the fact that so few young adults have had anyone look them in the face and say directly to them, with compassion and concern, “you really suck.”^[i]

There are probably more elegant ways to say that but I agree with the young pastor theologically. And psychologically. One of the reasons Dr. Phil is as popular as he is, say critics, is due to his truthful confrontation of people. Even if we don’t enjoy having the truth told directly to us we enjoy listening-in as Dr. Phil tells the truth to someone else.

So what we have is an irony: we know in our hearts that we need to hear the truth about ourselves on the one hand but on the other hand many churches have bowed to our initial fears of hearing the truth and concluded that speaking the truth is detrimental to attracting members.^[ii]

Yet, there can be little denying in today’s world that we are a flawed species. The most recent example might be the paying of exorbitant bonuses to the very people who created some of the financial instruments that were a catalyst for the global fiscal crisis without any of those corporate leaders stepping back asking, “what’s wrong with this picture?”

But evil skews our vision. “The evil in the self,” says Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom, “is a remarkable ‘ability to forget’ that both safeguards and aggrandizes the self.”^[iii] We’re not talking a little man in red tights and with a pitchfork.

We’re talking hubris or the “inflating” of our self-worth and capabilities.

Reinhold Niebuhr talked about this in “The Irony of American History” published in 1952 at the height of American influence and McCarthyism.

During the presidential campaign it was more than a little refreshing to hear the leading candidate, Barack Obama, say, “Niebuhr is one of my favorite philosophers. I take away from his works the compelling idea that there is *serious evil in the world*, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief [that] we can eliminate these things. But we should not use this as an excuse for cynicism and inaction.”^[iv]

‘So far, so good’ maybe you’re thinking. This sounds reasonable and true. But let me turn the heat up just a little. Isn’t it curious that when we think of ‘evil’ we almost never think of anything *within* us?

I’m not talking about low self-esteem, an overactive conscience or berating ourselves for something we said. Rather when we think of evil we think, rightly, something deeper and more structural. But we tend, I believe, to see it almost exclusively as an impersonal force *outside* of ourselves: earthquakes, famines, dictatorships.

We even use this external, more cosmic view of evil to implicate God. “With all the suffering in the world how can I believe in God?” we sometimes say; *forgetting* Genesis tells us the primal world God created was pleasant and idyllic until *we* arrived.

Evil arises with the advent of humans. Jesus says in the seventh chapter of Mark that evil is what comes up out of the human heart which echoes the original meaning of the word: “under” or “up from under.” Yet, it is easier to see and lament evil in some large, systemic incarnation than it is in our very hearts.

And so we are like the man in Wallace Stevens’ poem writing letters home from his hotel in Naples at the foot of Mt. Vesuvius which has been groaning for a month. “It was pleasant to be sitting there,” he thought. “It was almost time for lunch. The volcano seemed to tremble far away in another ether, yet little did the man realize,” says Stevens, “how near.”^[v]

The trembling volcano is, of course, evil, or to use psychological language is the brewing anxiety, the festering fear – that comes up out of our hearts as we go about our lives until it erupts into outbursts of rage or violence or implodes into self-destructive conformity.

The other word for this is “sin.” Sin is the problem we have between us and God that Paul Tillich called separation from the image of God in our hearts. It is rebellion against our Creator. Sin is more than taboo, dread, or shame—more than not living up to our potential, making mistakes, or being off the mark a notch.

“The wages of sin is death,” says St. Paul. And in Ephesians today “you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.”

Or as Jesus says this morning, “we love the darkness” because it allows us to forget our true selves; to hide from ourselves, or to believe false stories of who we are and are meant to be—all the while knowing we are selling ourselves a bill of goods.

But through Jesus we are given another “lens” if you will; another perspective on who we are, who we are meant to be, who God is and what God wants for us.

What is this story of Jesus? In the Gospel of John it is the story of light coming into the world; light entering the darkness.^[vi]

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it, says the Gospel. What that means, in part, is that the light of Jesus reveals not only the inclusive, open-minded and sympathetic part of God that is within us but also reveals the jagged contours and sharp edges of our brokenness.

Jesus, urges us to take another look at ourselves: If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off or your eye, pluck it out. Any one who wants to follow me will leave mother and father and brother and sister. Woe to you for you tithe material things but reject the weightier matters of the law.

This is the searing light of Jesus we shy away from, retreating instead into the shadows and darkness.

But if we trust the light of truthfulness, the light of Jesus we can step into it and find life.

A recovering alcoholic once told me why she stopped coming to church. “Reverend,” she said, “after you have been to AA, taken the cure, had to stare your demons in the face, had to stand up naked in front of 20 other drunks and tell every bad thing you’ve done or thought, and then ask God and them to forgive you for being ‘you,’ well, church just doesn’t re-form me at that level anymore.”

One of our biggest challenges as a church is to teach us we are sinners, yet it is the path that leads to restoration and wholeness.

What inspires me about that recovering woman—because we are all recovering from something—is her courage and willingness to live dangerously, to confront herself one day at a time, one confession at time. She lets the light of truth expose her willful self-deception with God’s help, with fearless honesty, and with a loving community.

This religion – for religion means binding up what is broken – is lived not according to the milquetoast, user-friendly, afraid-to-call-a-spade-a-spade Jesus but according to the one who spewed lukewarm, self-satisfied piety from his mouth.

“Examine the lives of the best and most fruitful people,” asks one writer, “and ask yourselves whether a tree that is supposed to grow to a proud height can dispense with bad weather and storms; whether misfortune and external resistance, or internal challenges like some kinds of hatred, jealousy, stubbornness, mistrust, hardness, and avarice...do not belong among the...conditions of life without which any great growth even of virtue is possible. The poison of which weaker natures perish strengthens the strong....Soon the age will be past when you were content to live hidden in forests like shy deer.”^[vii]

I think what the old philosopher is getting at is that in the long run, we do better to accept ourselves for who and what we are – rather than to try to run from our faults like frightened deer who seek the cover of the forest.

Self-denial is the encroachment of the shadow of evil that shrouds our brokenness and justifies actions that perpetuate broken relationships and lives.

The message today is this: let the light of Jesus which is the pure light of truth and of God expose our inner impulse that keeps us from admitting to God and another person that we need help, that we want to change our ways, and that we want to liberate the image of God in our hearts. Amen.

[i] Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* vol 37, No. 1, Year B, January – March 2009, 51.

[ii] Willimon, 50.

[iii] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976) 230.

[iv] Brian Urquhart, “What You Can Learn From Reinhold Niebuhr,” *The New York Review of Books* Volume LVI, Number 5 March 26, 2009, 22.

[v] Wallace Stevens, “Esthetique du Mal,” from *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Press, 1982) 313.

[vi] Willimon, 52.

[vii] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 228.