

July 23, 2017
Old Testament: Genesis 28:10-19a
New Testament: Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43
“Attitudes on Evil”
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Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!’ And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; **Genesis 28:10-19a**

Jesus put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” He answered, “An enemy has done this.” The slaves said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” But he replied, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’” ’

Then Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ He answered, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen! **Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43.**

The Words of God for the People of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer, amen.

How many of you know who Dr. Who is? *Doctor Who* is a British science-fiction television program produced by the BBC since 1963. The program depicts the adventures of a Time Lord called “The Doctor”, an extraterrestrial being from the planet Gallifrey (*Gol’ i free*). The Doctor explores the universe in a time-travelling space ship called the Tardis. Its exterior appears as a blue British police box, which was a common sight in Britain in 1963 when the series first aired. Accompanied by a number of companions, the Doctor combats a variety of foes, while working to save civilizations and help people in need.

The show is a significant part of British pop culture, and here in the US has a huge cult following. The program originally ran from 1963 to 1989. There was an unsuccessful attempt to revive it in 1996. But finally, the program was successfully relaunched in 2005 and can be viewed almost anywhere in the world today on cable. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_Who

This year marked the 40th anniversary of a classic *Doctor Who* episode called “The Face of Evil Part 4.” The episode, which aired January 22, 1977, is about the Doctor trying to make peace between two warring tribes, the primitive Sevateem and the technically brilliant Tesh. Xoanon (zew’a non) is a rather menacing and malevolent self-aware computer that the ignorant and illiterate Sevateem worship blindly as a god. The Computer, it seems has learned to lie and it has led the Sevateem on a collision course with disaster. But of course, the computer’s internal logic tells it that it is “for the good of the Seveteem” to tell them whatever is necessary to maintain the balance of power. (read to keep the computer in power)

Problem is that now those lies have led the Seveteem into wreaking disaster across the cosmos.

At one point this advanced lying computer takes control of the mind of Doctor Who’s cohort, Leela. The Doctor finally breaks her trance through hypnosis. But not before telling her and the audience this bit of philosophical wisdom:

“You know,” he says, “The very powerful and the very stupid have one thing in common. They don’t alter *their* views to fit the facts. *They* alter the facts to fit their views. And this is the very face of evil for it is so insidious and near impossible to weed out.”

Fast forward. It is now January 22, 2017 – 40 years to the day that “The Face of Evil Part Four” first aired. Kellyanne Conway, an advisor to President Trump is being interviewed on *Meet the Press*. When asked to comment on White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s “lie” when he said that President Donald Trump’s inauguration was the most-attended one in history (even though it clearly wasn’t), she responded that Spicer was *not* lying, he was just sharing “alternative facts.” <http://io9.gizmodo.com/doctor-who-quote-about-alternative-facts-sounds-awfully-1791490382>, “*Doctor Who* Quote About ‘Alternative Facts’ Sounds Awfully Relatable 40 Years Later,” Beth Elderkin, January 17, 2017.

Stephen Colbert reminds us every night that such “alternative facts” have continued to be shared on a regular basis by the Trump administration, to the point where it is now difficult it seems, even for Trump himself to tell the difference between reality and out and out mendacities.

Colbert asserts that Dr. Who was indeed Prophetic. Are we witnessing the “Face of evil?” And what if we are? Is our judgement sound here? And if so what is one to do?

Today’s New Testament text is informative here. In it, Jesus answers two questions using a parable about the weeds and the wheat (commonly known as the parable of the wheat and the tares): The first question is: “Is evil a real purposeful entity?” to which the parable answers, ‘Yes.’ And, the second is: “Are there persons so corrupted by evil that they are beyond redemption?” to which the parable answers, ‘Yes, but.’ ‘Yes, there are persons so corrupted, *but...* it is not always possible to tell unequivocally who they are, and even when you can, you can’t separate them out right now without doing damage to those who are uncorrupted and true. So you are to leave that up to God.’

Liturgically, as part of the Church Universal, we are in lectionary year A. That means for three weeks in July this year, the focus of the Old and New Testament texts for Sunday worship are on the interplay of Good and Evil. From the New Testament we have the texts regarding three separate seed parables from the 13th chapter of Matthew. The companion texts from the Old Testament are those making up the sordid, if not fascinating story of Jacob in Genesis 25 through 33.

Today’s OT text relates Jacob’s famous dream of the ladder to heaven with angels *ascending* and *descending* it. It is important to note that it is a dream that occurs on the heels of Jacob deceiving his poor old blind father, Isaac, into giving him his brother, Esau’s inheritance – with his mother’s help, I might add – thus stealing his brother, Esau’s birthright right out from under him.

And so, *this* companion text to the weeds and the wheat also has a definite view on evil, albeit one that is much more subtle. While the seed stories are fierce in their assumption that weeds grow by hidden but intentional evil action—a scary thought—the story of Jacob lays the evil out there in the open and allows plenty of room for us to actually do something about it.

It is a significant but often overlooked detail that the angels on Jacob’s ladder to heaven, travel in *both* directions – from God to us – yes, but surprisingly, also from us back to God. One would think, given the questionable nature of Jacob’s character, the only direction that divine power, love and grace need travel would be from the heavens down to Jacob. Instead, there is a strange reciprocity revealed in the dream – a reciprocity that is emphasized again years later when Jacob wrestles with a divine figure in the night to a kind of draw resulting in a both a wounding and a special blessing.

The Jacob story seems to say that yes, indeed, evil is woven inextricably into the fabric of human life. In fact, the writers of Genesis never sugar coat the fact that Jacob, himself is a user of evil deceit for selfish gain. But Jacob also knows how to recognize, seek, and follow God. Both the weeds and the wheat are a part of the human soul

And it would appear from the Jacob story that God needs our wheat. Evidently it is only as a result of this divine/human exchange, that God’s wheat is separated out for good use. When Jacob awakens from the ladder dream, local shepherds “wickedly” refuse to remove the stone from the mouth of the well for his future wife, Rachel’s sheep. So Jacob does it himself. The

message here is that, when we are faithful, even we humans with weeds on the soul can be active agents of goodness in the face of the various incarnations of evil that come our way.

All this is to say that the Bible has more than one picture of evil.

In Paul Levy's eye-opening book, Dispelling Wetiko: Breaking the Curse of Evil (2013), we find *this* definition:

“Evil is that tendency which—whether in ourselves or others—inhibits personal growth, destroys or limits innate potentialities, curtails freedom, fragments or disintegrates the personality, diminishes the quality of personal relationships, and creates divisiveness in the whole human family. It limits our ability to love, to grow, to evolve. . . . Evil is anti-life; it is life turning against itself. Evil diminishes the fullness of life. . . . It is the use of power to destroy the spiritual growth of others”

We see forms of this evil in both our Old and our New Testament texts, even though each has a somewhat different view of humanity. In the weeds and wheat parable, the human beings are confused. They are not very powerful. “Human weak, devil strong” is the theme of this story. There *is* a devil incarnate and *his* power exists *in* nature and can be *overpowering*.

Alternatively, the story of Jacob is that humans are strong enough, with God's blessing, to fulfill not only their own destiny but that of God's as well. Here, evil is not so much an opposite force to goodness as it is a frustrated or uneducated human will. The theme of the Jacob stories is that God is a strong force of goodness, yes, but humans are also strong forces of goodness—and that evil is less strong than the combination of the two.

We often internalize one or the other of these points of view. Those of us who recognize evil and injustice and believe God is with us tend to be go-getters. Much good is wrought in the world through us. However when we have this stance, we can also have a tendency to believe we can do more than we are capable of. We run the risk of terrorizing other good people with our crusades on behalf of the victims of evil and injustice. Like Jacob and Zoanon, it becomes easy to come to the conclusion that the end justifies the means.

On the other hand those of us who are like the audience of Jesus, understanding evil as completely overpowering, tend to want to rely on God more by *doing* less and becoming more. But we have a tendency to terrorize ourselves. We are all too aware of those possessed of evil intent who would intentionally sow bad seed; we thus not only fear them, we fear our own inner incapacity in the face of the magnitude of it. We become frozen and apathetic, having concluded that we can do nothing.

Fortunately, the truth is somewhere in between these two extremes.

We could take a lesson here from Abraham Lincoln. To this day, although a majority of Americans disagree on almost everything else, they do agree on one thing: When asked, “Who was the greatest president?” over 75% say Lincoln. And one of the most fascinating books ever written about Lincoln is Joshua Wolf Shenk's psychological portrait, *Lincoln's Melancholy*.

Shenk writes: “Lincoln saw the world as a deeply flawed, even tragic, place where imperfect people had to make the best of poor materials. At his worst, the burdens of this vision pressed him into ruts and troughs. At his best, it fueled a passion for redemption.”

Lincoln was no starry-eyed optimist, nor was he the relentlessly positive backslapper so many modern politicians strive to be. He was melancholic, at times even gloomy.

He never joined a church, although he attended worship regularly. His speeches, especially the Second Inaugural Address, hands-down the best piece of Presidential theology ever written, speak with awe of the sovereignty of God. Yet, Lincoln steadfastly and humbly resisted claiming that God was on his side. He never gave so much as a hint that he considered the Confederacy an “evil empire.”

Lincoln was all too aware that he lived in a fallen world, and that he led a fallen country. Yet, he never gave up on the possibility of redemption. --Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 133.

And neither should we.

There is a continuum of thought about evil and our two texts give us two useful points on that continuum.

Theologian, Al Winn reminds us, “At the heart of biblical faith we do not find a syllogism, an airtight argument sealed with a *therefore* – as in all is right with the world, *therefore*, let us have faith; *therefore*, let us praise God. No. At the heart of biblical faith, we find a non sequitur, something that does not follow at all, sealed with a *nevertheless*. Much is wrong with the world, the mystery of evil is great. *Nevertheless*, let us have faith; *nevertheless*, let us praise God. --Albert Curry Winn, *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, the Creed, the Commandments* (Westminster John Knox, 1990), 79-80.

Our problem is that we can conceive of a “perfect” world free of evil. But therein lay the danger. When Hitler’s Nazi party first made its pitch to the German people, one of its chief selling points was that the party would resolve the disorder that had plagued the Weimar Republic. It would wage war on imperfection. It would curb runaway inflation. It would manage the output of unpredictable, sometimes antisocial, artists. It would make the trains run on time. And it did.

Such solutions held great appeal to a nation of disenchanting white men grown more than weary of hard times. And the Nazis also had a solution for human imperfection, as they saw it: a Final Solution, in fact. It was a sort of housecleaning of the human race. And it was a breeding ground for unspeakable evil.

Beware the temptation to realize perfection – it eventually leads to the logical need to separate the weeds from the wheat. It is, perhaps, the most dangerous temptation of all.

In *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way:

By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.

What are we to do then in the face of obvious, abject evil? Well, if Evil arises from nature as Jesus seems to indicate then perhaps we could learn something *from* the world of nature.

Naturalist Loren Eiseley tells of a remarkable sight he observed once while in the woods. A young bird has just been snatched from its nest by a raven. The outraged response of the birds seems to him almost human, demonstrating a sense of the tragic.

“Suddenly, out of all that area of woodland, a soft sound of complaint began to rise. Into the glade fluttered small birds of half a dozen varieties drawn by the anguished outcries of the tiny parents.

“No one dared to attack the raven. But they cried there in some instinctive common misery. The bereaved and the unbereaved. The glade filled with their soft rustling and their cries. They fluttered as though to point their wings at the murderer. There was a dim intangible ethic he had violated, that they knew. He was a bird of death.

And he, the murderer, the black bird at the heart of life, sat on there, glistening in the common light, formidable, unmoving, unperturbed, untouchable.

Then the sighing died. It was then that I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest, they forgot the violence. There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing were being slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth they had forgotten the raven, for they were the singers of life, and not of death. -- Loren Eiseley, "The Judgment of the Birds," public.iastate.edu/~bccorey/105%20Folder/The%20Judge%20of%20Birds.pdf. Retrieved June 12, 2012.

So is Jesus, and as his disciples, so should we be: The bringers and the singers of life and truth in spite of or maybe even because of a world so filled with lies and death.

Let us pray. Gracious God, that evil is in the world in a powerful way seems so obvious to us. Make your renewing, life-giving presence as obvious to us as it is to songbirds in the shadow of a menacing raven so that our actions come from that joy known only in the source of life rather than in any striving for a ridding of the world of evil.

And now bless these gifts that they may proclaim our hope of redemption even in the midst of what often appears powerlessness against the overwhelming evil in this world. In Christ's name we pray, amen.