

GOOD AND EVIL

A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
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Isaiah 1:11-18

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

I GREW UP IN THE BIBLE BELT, surrounded by a type of Christianity that was certain of what was right and what was wrong. Stepping outside the bounds of those hard lines meant that you were “backsliding” or losing your faith. The rules were very black and white, and the walls keeping people in and out were very tall. Admittedly, in many ways, that kind of faith was simple. It was simple because it told you exactly what to do. All you had to do was follow the rules, and you were fine. We never had to use our own brains or question anything. In fact, that was greatly discouraged. And many people found great solace in that kind of faith, still do.

WHEN LIFE IS HARD AND CONFUSING and fraught with so many unknowns, it *can* be comforting to have someone pontificate and tell you all the answers each Sunday. I’ve heard all kinds of things from: “Oh, you’re sick. It’s because you didn’t pray enough.” to “If you kiss your boyfriend, you’ll ruin your future marriage, so no physical affection until the wedding!” The problem with this kind of faith, this kind of theology,

though, is that it can unravel real quick. If you have the audacity to just pick at one little part of that hard veneer, things start to chip and crumble. That's not to say people won't do all kinds of mental gymnastics to hold onto that kind of faith, but it's pretty easy to step back and realize, the world doesn't work like these faith leaders purport. Good, faithful people get sick and die, too. Amazing humans end up in marriages that aren't life-giving or love-filled. And this pseudo-gospel-message that if you just do all the right things, then everything will go just as you hoped and planned, simply does not cut it.

AS A YOUNG ADULT, I came into a different kind of faith. A faith that learned to embrace much more mystery, a faith that didn't hold all the answers, but instead promised love and new life and God's presence even without certainty. A faith that could say, "you know what, I don't know why that horrible thing happened, but I do know God is with us even in the midst of this horrible thing." This new faith deconstructed everything that I held as truth, but then was put together into something much messier, but also much deeper and more meaningful than ever before. I came into a faith that wasn't black and white, a faith that wasn't even grey, but insanely colorful and bright and full of diversity. A faith that chose to follow the rule of love over any rule of law. And it's harder in many ways because there are so many more unknowns; and it requires that I know not only my scripture but its context and the culture in which it was written; and I have to hold lightly to so many things. Certainty is replaced with well, faith. And while the process was hard, I am so grateful that my faith journey has taken me through these questions and doubts and forced me to expand and wonder and get rid of the box that I was forcing God and myself into.

I THINK MOST OF US here at Calvary share that kind of faith: a faith that embraces mystery, a faith that doesn't always have all the right answers, a faith that is more about love than it is about laws. It's one of the reasons I love being a pastor here. I can be honest with you all about my uncertainties and my doubts. I can say, "I'm not sure," and not get kicked out for being a completely useless faith leader who doesn't have all the answers! Many mainline, protestant denominations have embraced this kind of theology, a sort of progressive, critical, and curious faith. But sometimes, not always, but sometimes with that, comes a sort of reluctance to call out something as evil or as sin. We can trend towards relativism because we are afraid to judge; we don't want to cause the kind of harm that other types of Christianity have caused by pointing the finger and bringing judgement to what they understand as evil. So we are often reticent to do the same. I know that I personally am reluctant to do so because those words were so often misused and abused in those revivals and services that I went to growing up that they trigger for me all kinds of bad, awful, harmful theology.

"SIN" almost always meant something very specific and private, something I had failed to do or something I did do. And evil was anyone or anything that might deviate from a traditional, heterosexual understanding of societal norms. So as I've embraced a different kind of faith; I have tended to not use the words "sin" and "evil" a whole lot. I've witnessed how people in power use those words to oppress those whom they deem "the other." And I don't want to fall into that trap. I want to exude grace and love and a God of many, many chances; a God whose love is boundless, a faith that offers mercy and hope, not condemnation and fear. But then I read the prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos and Micah. And they were unafraid to use the word sin and to condemn evil; they seemed so clear about what is good and what is evil, about what is right and what is wrong. And while the story of Pinocchio and Jiminy Cricket will tell us to "let your conscience guide you," we actually have these scriptures that can provide us some guidance, too, for what is good and what is evil. And here's the thing. What the prophets condemned doesn't sound anything like the kind of sin that was condemned when I was growing up. And *who* they condemned wasn't usually, poor individuals at a prayer meeting seeking salvation, but it was communal, entire systems and powers and principalities that were perpetrating evil. And they weren't constantly just railing or spreading fear or intolerance. The prophets stood up and spoke out when the injustices and the evil got so bad, God would not put up with it anymore. So what is good and what is evil?

ISAIAH 1:16-17 SAYS, "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." According to Isaiah, what is good? Good is seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow. In our Hebrew scriptures, justice is not a blind-folded woman holding scales

of equality, everything even-balanced for everyone. Justice, in our scriptures, is partial; it always sides with the oppressed, the “orphan and the widow,” and oftentimes added to that is caring for the immigrant, the sojourner. So if that is good, what is evil? What does God abhor? Isaiah chapter one tells us that God hates futile worship; God hates shows of holiness and devotion that are only skin deep. God cannot stand our self-serving solemn assemblies, our vigils, and our “thoughts and prayers” that do not lead to action.

THE PROPHETS WERE CALLED for specific times in Israel’s history when change was absolutely necessary. The prophets spoke out to help the nation change, to stop its corrupt and evil ways, and to bring transformation and an opportunity for a new way of life. When I read Isaiah, I can’t help but think of our nation today, of all the orphans and widows we have not only failed to care for but created due to our lack of action on gun violence, and I am sick to my stomach as I realize I am complicit in evil. When I read Isaiah, and consider how our government today treats immigrants, how just this week we’ve detained over 600 people in Mississippi, leaving gymnasiums full of children parent-less, essentially orphaned, I get sick to my stomach from the sin that stains my hands and my heart.

THE TIME HAS COME for people of faith to stand up and speak out, to say enough is enough, and that we must change. We have to name evil for what it is. We have to name sin for what it is. When the prophets spoke of sin, they weren’t bringing forth adulterers and sexual deviants or naming the personal things each person had done or not done. They were calling out systems, systems that harmed the most vulnerable among us; policies that allowed children and those who had no power or voice to suffer among us. Friends, what we are doing to the immigrants and asylum seekers among us as a country is evil. And our collective lack of action when it comes to gun violence - that certainly intersects with white nationalism, toxic masculinity, and mental health, but at the heart of it is still gun violence - that is sin.

SIN IS REAL. And evil is perpetrated in our name every day whether we acknowledge it or not. And unless we find the courage to name it for what it is, we can never truly confess of it and turn away from it, because then and only then might we help co-create with God a new and different reality. The Rev. Deanna Hollas was recently named the first “minister of gun violence prevention” by our denomination the Presbyterian Church (USA). Yes, we now have a minister of gun violence prevention. And here’s what she says:

“The saying ‘thoughts and prayers’ has been co-opted by the gun lobby to keep the church from taking action so they can increase their profits.

While all that we do as Christians should be rooted in worship and prayer, it should not stay there. It is like breathing — worship and prayer is the in-breath, and action is the out-breath.”

THE KIND OF WORSHIP that Isaiah speaks of in its first chapter, is the kind of worship that leads to no transformation, the kind of worship that takes no action, the kind of worship that takes the in-breath, but never breathes out into the world. Our faith must both breathe in and breathe out; otherwise it is not complete. Otherwise, God says, God does not want it. One of the things I love about our reformed worship is that every week, we pray together a prayer of confession. Sometimes we give you the space to prayer your own personal prayer in silence. But most of the time, it is a communal, a corporate prayer that we all say together. And I love that. Because it is an opportunity for all of us to confess our complicity, not just to the individual sins we might commit week to week, but to the sinful systems in which we all participate daily. It is a moment when we can all come humbly before God and acknowledge that “our sins are like scarlet . . . red like crimson,” (Isaiah 1:18). And it is an opportunity when we can truly repent, so that we might be made right with God; so that we might go and right the world which God loves.

THE HEBREW WORD FOR “REPENT” IS *SHUV*. It literally means “to turn,” to turn away from sin and evil and to turn to God and God’s ways. God gives us the opportunity each week, every day actually, to turn, to *shuv*, and to change our ways, to commit to living differently. And the more we practice naming sin and then exercise that muscle of turning, of repentance, the stronger it gets, and the better we get at it. Calvary is no stranger

to this. We have practiced this together as a community. I witnessed it when we chose to become a Sanctuary church, when we committed to publicly declaring that “Black Lives Matter,” and that all are welcome here regardless of sexuality by flying the Pride banner. But what brought me to this congregation nearly six years ago is a story that bears repeating:

A group of youth went on a mission trip where they experienced a poverty simulation. They came back and shared their experience with the church, and they didn’t use these exact words, but, essentially, they declared that having people live in poverty in this rich nation was a sin, and they professed that no one should have to live in poverty.

THIS CHURCH and its session heard these prophets speak the truth of God among them, and the church took heed and repented. Calvary turned, *shun*-ed, towards God, in the most Presbyterian way possible, you formed a task force, a Poverty Task Force. And you studied together asking: what are some of the root causes of poverty; what could break cycles of poverty; who in San Francisco is already doing this work, and how might we support them? That’s how we decided on and came to support our four Breaking Cycles of Poverty partners: New Door Ventures, SF Achievers, Raphael House, and Boys and Girls Club. Through both our financial contributions as a congregation as well as our volunteer resources, we partner with these organizations to combat the evil of poverty.

THE CHURCH RECOGNIZED THAT all four of these partners, in their own unique way, were doing something in the city to help prevent poverty, to stop the cycle of generational poverty. We turned our worship, our thoughts and prayers, into tangible action, a way to make a difference in this city. And that’s what we are called to do as a church, again and again: To hear the prophets among us pointing out to us what is wrong and what is evil in the world we live in. And then finding ways to right that wrong; to turn from evil towards good. Through Bible Study, through prayer, through worship, through volunteering and through giving, even through committees and task forces, we are able to choose good over evil; to find ways to both breathe in and breathe out; to be the church by both worshipping and taking action.

THIS MORNING, we have the great privilege of hearing from a young woman who is a part of the Boys and Girls Club in San Francisco. Maybe your breath-out this week can be signing up for just one volunteer opportunity with one of our Breaking Cycles of Poverty partners sometime in the next month. I hope you will. Every step away from what is evil and towards what is good matters, counts, has a ripple effect that has a reach we may not even realize. God longs to partner with us, so that good might prevail on earth. Today, we start again anew, a people claimed and called by God. So once again in this service of worship: I invite you take a deep breath with me: in and out. May we live our lives of faith in that same way.

AMEN.