

March 18, 2012

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Russell E. Gundlach

*Beyond Good & Evil – Grace*

Reading:

From: “Be This Fish”: A Theology of Creation out of Chaos, by Catherine Keller

When you make a fresh start—perhaps just getting up after a night of dark dreams, or starting to write after a spell of blockage, or loving after a time of loneliness, or living after a great loss—you have faced the dark waters. But are they evil? Or are they rather more ambiguous, chaotic, turbulent—surging with still unformed potentials along with deformed pasts? ... The open-ended interactivity of the process of creation exposes us to suffering and evil, but also to great good. And sometimes it will take great discernment to tell the difference. It will take great spirit. We are always in over our heads.

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August 4, 1892, an extremely hot and humid day (95 to 100 degrees), place Fall River, an industrial town in southeast Massachusetts. Before the day ended the bodies of Mr. & Mrs. Borden were found in their home. Their death resulted from swift, expert blows from an ax. Daughter Lizzie was arrested, indicted, and finally acquitted. Who did it? After 100 years the crime is still in the news, the Borden home a popular Bed & Breakfast. Some guests report bizarre happenings occurring overnight. Lizzie was known to have been sadistic in treatment of animals in her younger life, yet she was also a prominent member of the Congregational church. Evil localized and on a small scale that has captured the imagination of people for all this time.

Peter Englund, “Beauty and the Sorrow”, describes the intimate reflections of 20 participants in World War I representing both sides, both genders and varying ages. They describe, sometimes graphically, the horror of that war. In 1916 Paolo Monelle, an Italian soldier:

“This is war. It is not the risk of dying, nor the red fireworks display of a bursting shell that blinds us as it comes whizzing down ... but the feeling of being a puppet in the hands of an unknown puppeteer ... and that feeling sometimes chills the heart as if death itself had taken hold of it.”

There is not doubt that these are examples of the reality of evil, the kind of violence and destruction that human beings inflict upon each other.

A definition comes to us from our Buddhist friends of evil:

“Evil is the emergence of selfishness in this world. The principle of unselfish giving was twisted into an ungodly principle of selfish taking. It (evil) is the desire to be served rather than to serve.”

John MacQuarrie, the late Episcopal scholar, describes evil as negative, destructive, ceasing to be, lapsing into nothingness.

The book of Genesis affirms that creation is good. This is the affirmation of today’s sermon, and I believe, the intention of the Judeo/Christian myths. Babylonian myths describe primeval divine warriors, representing good and evil, in conflict. Both are part of creation. The resulting influence has come into Judeo/Christian teaching. There must be a good over against evil, bad over against good, right against wrong, saint against sinner. An enemy is a necessity, that’s the way it is. James Charlesworth of Princeton Seminary has written an intensive study of the place of the serpent in the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament. He insists that the serpent has its place as a symbol of healing, health, well-being and rejuvenation. St. Augustine and others have been guilty of putting a dark and evil spin on the story of the fall emphasizing guilt and shame and sin. Creation is good. A definition of the good also comes from our Buddhist friends: “The good is total unselfishness, total giving of one to another, living for others.”

I suggest that we have the opportunity as individuals and congregational people to pass on a blessing. We do not need a divinity degree to bless another. Blessing as we learned from Carolyn last week is to affirm the worth, dignity and well being of the other and to be about the business of restoration and reconciliation. Paul Tillich has described grace as total acceptance of the other while suspending judgment. Grace is the opportunity to express concern for both perpetrator and victim who are in conflict. We decline the need to judge and humbly put ourselves in the place or situation of the other. The demonization of others defining who’s good and bad, saint and sinner, does not need to be a part of our cultural familial religious make up. Let’s do away with these categories and be about the business of giving blessings, working toward the health, the safety and the freedom of others.

Here is an illustration: Many years ago a young man we’ll call Ben enters our worship service. Afterwards he discloses himself as a wanderer who has been all around the United States receiving transportation from police who escort him to the borders of various cities and towns. Ben is temporarily given lodging and food by a family in the church. He is able to qualify for a government sponsored program and he finds work. Later he moves into an apartment. Ben was a person of few words. I don’t ever remember him saying “thank you”. But as suddenly as he finds his way into our lives he disappears to resume his wandering.

I see evil as being real and the danger is that we can become distant from it as something out there. We want to protect ourselves and insulate our children from harm. I remember two hospital volunteers in a wealthy suburban suburb of New York City overheard talking about how irritated they were by all the attention given to the Holocaust. Elie Weisel, the Jewish survivor and scholar, reminds us to keep alive the memory of the Holocaust so it doesn’t happen again. God looked upon the creation and declared it to be good. So be it. Amen.