

“Today”
Luke 4:16-21
21st Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

After Hamas attacked Israel 15 days ago,
one of the words that appeared in the news,
and from the lips of many a politician and pundit,
was the word EVIL.

What Hamas did was evil.
I completely agree.

It’s preposterous to try to morally justify the horrific actions of
Hamas that day, or ANY other terrorist organization on any day.

Antisemitism, pogroms and genocide are always evil.
These things can go by no other name.

As I mentioned a moment ago, our topic today is evil.
What do Presbyterians believe...about evil?

But I raise the topic of evil today, not only because the word has
appeared so much in world around us the past two weeks. I raise it
because the word “evil,” the subject of evil, appears in our worship
service EVERY single week.

Have you ever noticed that?

During the baptisms that [will take place/just took place] this
morning, do you remember what one of the questions [was/is] that the
parents always answer?

“Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?”

Do you remember what we pray every single Sunday in the Lord’s Prayer?

“...lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Did you catch it in the 4th verse of the first hymn we sang today?

“Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore...”

Why do we use that word so consistently?
Evil is such a strong word.

After all, it’s one thing to recognize that all in this room today are sinful people.

How many of you would agree with that?
Show of hands:
How many of you would agree that everyone here sins?
Exactly.

Not hard to admit our sin.
But much harder to see some part of our lives...as evil.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus speaks about evil.
We didn’t read this text, but you may remember the text:

“...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander....”

So...second show of hands: how many of you have a heart?
 Not a trick question.
 Good...

Think about what that means.
 According to Jesus, anyone with a heart has the capacity...for evil:
 to speak evil,
 to be silent in the face of evil,
 to be unaware of the evil that one has done,
 or is in the process of doing...

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, was a raging anti-Semite. And his writings against people of the Jewish faith, which he thought we faithful, were filled with bigotry and evil.

John Calvin, one of the forefathers of the Presbyterian denomination, once had someone burned at the stake because of a theological disagreement over the nature of God.

Chris Hedges is a former Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist who has written extensively about political upheaval:
 in Central America,
 in Iraq, in Bosnia—

He's been there, as a reporter, and he tells of one time in the late '80's when he was in Sudan.

An attempt to overthrow the Prime Minister had been made.
 Things were a mess.

Electricity and water were sporadic.
 Phones didn't work.
 The only thing functioning was "rampant corruption."

The coup had been deterred, but the army was nervous.

One day as dusk was settling on the city, Hedges and another reporter were walking through the streets and inadvertently set down the road toward the Presidential Palace.

The army had ordered the road closed, and in the half-light of sunset, when they saw Hedges and his colleague approaching, the guards noisily unlocked their weapons and pointed at the two reporters.

Hedges and his colleague saw this, and immediately FEARED FOR THEIR LIVES.

They started yelling, “Foreigners! Foreigners!”—
to keep the soldiers from shooting.

At which point, Hedges recalls, he “deftly and without hesitation...sidestepped” behind his colleague.

“Better to let any bullets pass through him first,” Hedges writes. “It was a disconcerting decision, one made swiftly and instinctually. To this day I have not had the heart to tell him.”¹

Speaking of hearts, it was the Russian dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who wrote the following from the Soviet gulag:

“Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties...but right through every human heart.”²

¹ Christ Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, New York: Anchor Books, 2002.

² As quoted by Fleming Rutledge, in her sermon “The Enemy Lines are Hard to Find,” in *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007.

THAT'S why we mention it so frequently in worship.

The first thing that Presbyterians believe about evil is that it's ubiquitous.

It can be found in any and every heart...

Which means we must approach the topic with humility.

But that's not all we believe about it.

The second thing Presbyterians believe about evil is this:

The goodness of God is stronger than evil.

We see that in our liturgy as well.

Getting back to that baptismal question...the question is NOT:

Do you renounce evil?

The question reads:

"Trusting in the gracious mercy of God...do you renounce evil?"

The distinction is important.

On our own, evil will always capture us.

But the good news of the gospel is that we are NEVER on our own.

Surrounded by the gracious mercy of God, we can turn from evil.

We don't always do it.

But by God's grace, we CAN do it.

God's goodness is a gift to each of us, and that divine goodness is found in every single heart in this room as well.

Look, so far you've been acing my questions today.

I asked you about sin, and you got that one right.

I asked how many of you have a heart, and you got that one right too.

Question number three:

How many of you have God's goodness inside of you?

I better see all hands in the air on that one too!

In other words, trust that the goodness of God is at work in you.
And it's at work in our world.

Trust it on good days.

And trust it on depressing days.

Trust it in joyful times and trust it in confusing times:

God's divine goodness is never going to leave you.

This is, I think, why Jesus said what he said when he went back to his home synagogue.

According to Luke, he read from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free."

These would have been powerful words to Jesus' hometown people. Because they were the ones living under Roman oppression! They were the ones who wanted to be free!

And when Jesus rolled up the scroll, he said:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Not...one day it will be fulfilled.

But today.

In other words, God's goodness is with you today.

Even under the thumb of Roman evil, God is here with you.

And the goodness of God is at work, even when you cannot see that it's at work.

There's a wonderful story about the day that the late Desmond Tutu was preaching at the Cathedral of St. George's in Cape Town, and the South African Security Police entered the sanctuary during his sermon.

Well, Tutu stopped preaching.

The intruders had writing pads, tape recorders. They were ready to take down whatever he said...and use it against him.

Now Tutu was not unfamiliar with their tactics.

Just a few weeks earlier, he—along with other church leaders—had been arrested and held in jail, so that the Pretoria regime could make its point: there will be consequences if you speak out against us.

So the first thing Tutu did, when they entered the sanctuary, was acknowledge their presence.

He said to the police: "You are powerful, very powerful."
Then he said: "But I serve a God who cannot be mocked!"

And then, with a smile on his face, he said to those police who were participating in the evil of apartheid:

“Since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!”³

Now I know Tutu was an Anglican priest.
But that’s really good Presbyterian theology!

Because it leads me to the third thing Presbyterians believe about evil:

God has already defeated it.

I know it doesn’t look that way in the world around us.
And even just saying that can come off sounding like pie in the sky, delusional thinking.

But here’s the thing:
Presbyterians do not believe that the ultimate outcome of everything is up in the air, and evil might prevail.

What we believe is that the love of God has already prevailed.
That in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus, the love of God has ALREADY won.

THAT’S what Desmond Tutu was getting at.

I invite you to join in God’s goodness...today.

³ Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics*, New York: HarperCollins, 2005. This story is cited at [Quote by Jim Wallis: “The former South African archbishop Desmond Tutu...” \(goodreads.com\)](https://www.goodreads.com/quote/show/1111111111).

It's where Presbyterians find our courage and our hope to stand against evil. Because the outcome has already been decided, and we are called by God to reflect that outcome...in the moral and ethical decisions we make with our lives.

Let me get at it like this.

There's a phrase that I first heard from another colleague.

It's a simple phrase, but I find it powerful:

Do the good that God has given you to do.

Do the good that God has given you to do...

Do you know the story of Derek Black?

Derek Black is the son of Don Black.

Don is the founder of a white nationalist radio show and website, and Derek is Don's son, as well as the godson of David Duke, the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

Derek Black was, for many years, helping with his father's radio show and website—in fact, his advice to his father about the website was a primary reason that the site grew from 30,000 users to 300,000.

Derek Black went to New College in Florida as a committed white nationalist, and he kept that part of his identity hidden from his fellow students.

Of course, Derek was still active online with the website and the radio show and his beliefs...and one day, a fellow student discovered who he really was.

On a campus-wide online message board, someone posted:

“Have you seen this man? Derek Black.
White supremacist, radio host...New College student?”

Of course, the reaction was swift.

“At one point after being exposed, Derek ventured out during a campus festival and was heckled by fellow students. Another day, a student [posted] on the schoolwide online forum... ‘Violence against white supremacists will send a message that white supremacists will get beat up. That’s *very* productive.’”

And yet a few students, as appalled as they were by Derek’s beliefs, refused to ostracize him.

Matthew was Derek’s friend.
Matthew was an observant Jew.

And Matthew had “already experienced enough shaming at New College to believe that exclusion only reinforced divides.”

So what did Matthew do?

He continued to invite Derek to Shabbat dinners, “which on any given night might include a few Orthodox Jews, an immigrant and a student who was gay.”

And Derek did not change overnight.
And his friends at school began to wonder if they were doing the right thing.

But Derek did change.
The change happened not in days, not in weeks...but over the course of a few years, he ultimately renounced his past, he renounced the movement.

He broke away from his family.

He lives, he now says, with “an infinite sort of guilt...The only way I can sort of wrestle with it is to realize that I can’t take things back, but I can keep pushing against [white nationalism].”

And what caused this change?

According to Derek Black, it was those students at his former college who stayed connected to him.⁴

Who did not give up on him.

It was people like his friend Matthew, who believed in a God that was bigger than any evil.

Now it’s not just Matthew who believed in that God.
Presbyterians do too.

So do the good that God has given you to do.

You see, Presbyterians believe that **because** God’s love has been revealed in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, anyone in this room can stand up to ANY evil:

whether it’s cruelty to a classmate at school,
or terrorism or antisemitism,
or racism or homophobia,
or corporate greed,

⁴ This summary is taken from three sources: “Renouncing Hate: What Happens When a White Nationalist Repents,” by Wes Enzina, *The New York Times*, September 10, 2018; “Why I Left White Nationalism,” by R. Derek Black, *The New York Times*, November 26, 2016; and “Former white nationalist talks about conversion at Holocaust Memorial Center,” by Kayla Dimick, *Southfield Sun*, April 10, 2019.

or domestic violence,
or cycles of homelessness and poverty—

No matter the evil, we trust that the love of God has already prevailed, and God's victory has already been accomplished.

So don't wait for next week.
And don't wait for tomorrow.

I've got a fourth question for you.
It's not a show of hands question.
I'd like an answer to this one:

When it comes to the good that God has given you to do,
when will you do it?

I'm not going to quit until I hear you say it...

Amen.