

Silence in the Face of Evil

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By The Rev. CJ McGregor

Delivered June 7, 2020

The theme of our messages this month is Good and Evil. It is good for us to define evil as we unpack today's message *Silence in the Face of Evil*. Since World War II, moral, political, and legal philosophers have become increasingly interested in the concept of evil. This interest has been partly motivated by attributions of 'evil' by laymen, social scientists, journalists, and politicians as they try to understand and respond to various atrocities and horrors, such as genocides, terrorist attacks, mass murders, and tortures and killing sprees by psychopathic serial killers. It seems that we cannot capture the moral significance of these actions and their perpetrators by calling them 'wrong' or 'bad' or even 'very very wrong' or 'very very bad.' We need the concept of evil.

Despite the confusion of the philosophers, the word "evil" is still in common use. Susan Nieman, author of *Evil In Modern Thought* tells us that she is understandably reluctant to offer a single, narrow definition of her own for what "evil" means today, but what she does suggest is a useful description of what *effect* evil has: calling something "evil," she writes, "is a way of marking the fact that it shatters our trust in the world." Evil is both harmful and inexplicable, but not just that; what defines an evil act is that it is permanently disorienting for all those touched by it.

Theologian Dietrich Boenhoffer wrote, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." That is, our silence in the face of evil is a decision that we make embracing evil. What is it that would allow us to be silent in the face of evil? Isn't it true that if we stand by with our heads in the sand we become complicit? Research points to three major reasons for our silence. The first is pluralistic ignorance. One of the first steps in anyone's decision to help another is the recognition that someone is actually in need of help. To do this, the bystander must realize that they are witnessing an emergency situation and that a victim is in need of assistance. When we are in an ambiguous situation we often look to others to see how they are reacting. We assume that others may know something that we don't, so we gauge their reactions before we decide how we will respond. But if those around us are not acting, then we may fail to recognize the immediacy of the situation and therefore fail to intervene.

The second is diffusion of responsibility. People may be silent if they do not take personal responsibility for intervening. The problem is that the more bystanders there are, the less responsible each individual feels. When you are the only eyewitness present, 100% of the responsibility for providing help rests on your shoulders. But if there are five eyewitnesses, only 20% of the responsibility is yours. The responsibility becomes defused or dispersed among the group members. In these situations, people may assume that someone else will help or that someone else is better qualified to provide assistance. But if everyone assumes this, then no one will intervene. The third and last is fatigue. We've seen all of the issues needing our attention before. It seems we have now become immune to that which ails the world and it takes more for us now to contribute, react and support.

We have evolved under conditions in which our primary concern is to protect ourselves and our families: Son Pham, a writer for the Ottawa Times, tells us “There was no adaptive value in protecting hundreds of thousands across an ocean. Today, technology brings us news of famine and genocide in distant lands, but still we are likely to react as we would have in earlier times.” Psychologist Paul Slovic asks how we can “overcome the psychological obstacles to action.” He says, “we must create laws and institutions to enforce appropriate action even when we are not psychologically equipped to act.” One of those institutions is the Unitarian Universalist congregation. We are compelled to act not because of a compelling pictures or stories, but because it's morally right. Listening to a lecture from a member of Nuns on the Bus Sister Simone I could tell that her work wasn't just a strategy to instigate action, it was a calling from a place of our shared longing and it was a place of significant risk as she told us, “But what you have to do is you have to let it sink down from the head into the heart. Walking towards trouble means we're willing to open ourselves to the surprise, to different perspectives. So, Sister Simone said, “the importance of being uncertain means that I live a life that is slightly disturbed, if you want to know the truth.”

The holocaust survivor, author, and Nobel prize winning Elie Wiesel tells us “The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.” Of course, indifference can be tempting -- more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away. It is so much easier to avoid interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbors are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction.

Wiesel writes “Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor -- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees -- not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own.” For me indifference is not unlike saying that you are colorblind. I constantly find myself challenging statements like: “I'm color blind” or “I don't even notice if people are black, have a disability, are impoverished, gay” and on and on. If you are not noticing these things you are denying someone parts of their identity that should be noticed and celebrated. These are the very things that enrich our experiences and communities. I wonder if we are afraid to take notice. We've been taught that spotting difference means we are being exclusive and at risk for being racist or oppressive. It is only when we do not desire to learn more about and honor our differences that we are at risk. We are at risk of ignoring injustice and hate, and so because of our blindness we are at risk of becoming indifferent.

A theme that winds through Wiesel's writing is that of the need to overcome indifference. He says, and I really like this idea, that we humans are defined by what troubles us, and that the response of a moral society, or of a moral person is getting involved with what troubles us. He reminds us that indifference means, “makes no difference” and that to remain silent, knowing that people are suffering and to have it “make no difference” is the greatest evil of all. Rather than be indifferent, Wiesel says “Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are

endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Whenever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe.”

So as we break our silence, “as we walk to meet the needs of human pain and human healing”, writes my colleague the Rev. George Milarr, “we walk with doubt and with the risk of the unknown and to me that is where we come to the edge. That place where doubt meets faith, that place of leaving certitude behind, that is the edge and the edge is a place where we find discomfort and the edge is the place where we grow. Business as usual is no longer enough. We are at the edge of crisis in how we live together with each other.”

“We can move away from the edge, says Milarr, “by reaching out in love. Reaching out in love implies moving beyond our places of comfort, including those we have placed around meeting our individual needs, and radically reaching out to those who may be searching for whatever we have found, and what we may be able to offer the world including those who are needing to find help for their human longings.” What does reaching out in love actually mean? First, it is about reaching, reaching out past the edge of our traditional comfort as individuals, and as congregations. It is totally understandable that we look for and hope for a community that wraps us in the comforting blanket of familiarity and reaching out in love can challenge that equilibrium. But radically reaching out in love can also challenge the systems and structures that have brought public racism, that deny and complicate our climate crisis, that continue the political stalemate that impedes us coming together to solve problems, and that feeds the growth of fundamentalism that threatens long-term peace. Reaching out in love is hard to do and our work is to think about how to crawl back when we get too close to the edge, how to care for ourselves and each other when the edge feels really scary and how to deal with the unknown when we reach the edge of what we know or have known.

When we are reaching out to the world with the values and principles that we cherish, we should be mustering the strength of others so more voices can be heard. When we stand with those who are oppressed, we should be doing that arm-in-arm and shoulder to shoulder with other UU's, other faith communities or partner organization who may not share our faith but certainly share our values. Instead of feeling overwhelmed today with the chaos and lack of love in the world, I am encouraged by the incredible efforts being put forth by so many. There is so much good, there is so much love, there actually is some progress, we have come so far with so much more to go in what may be a shorter time than we think. Find sources of strength and sustenance. Be willing to appreciate your comfort spots and yet, being willing to let go of things as they have always been done. Love still can prevail as we continue to walk towards trouble, reach out in love, and stand together on the edge. Campbell concluded her lecture by reading “Incarnation,” a poem she wrote in Baghdad, a portion of which was:

Let compassion be our hands, reaching to be with each other, all others to touch, hold, heal this fractured world. Let wisdom be our feet, bringing us to the crying need to friends or foe to share this body's blood. Let love be our eyes, that we might see the beauty, see the dream lurking in the shadows of despair and dread.

May it be so.

