

Proper 17B  
3 Sept 2006  
St Matthew's Westminster

*Deuteronomy 4:1-2; 7-9*  
*James 1:17-end*  
*Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

### **Evil, Terrorism, Them & Us**

Lately, it seems that every time we turn around, we are confronted with an anniversary or a remembrance of recent tragedy—or fresh news of new tragedy.

A great deal of this tragedy has resulted from natural disasters—the tsunami, hurricanes in the American Gulf coast, earthquakes in Pakistan and Indonesia, mudslides in Central America, floods and famine in Africa and typhoons in Asia.

But increasingly, the tragedies that grab our attention and strike fear into our hearts result from *intentional* human violence—apparently avoidable violence inflicted by human beings against other human beings: the London Tube and bus bombings...September 11...daily suicide bombings in Iraq...Israel and Hezbollah and Lebanon...

All of these tragedies seem senseless and unnecessary...and all the more so because human-engineered violence should be completely avoidable.

With regard to tragedies that result from human violence, we might be tempted to read today's readings and conclude that the perpetrators of these events have hearts that are filled with an inordinate amount of evil intentions—certainly far more than you or I—and therefore, we might also be tempted to draw a (sometimes subtle, sometimes blazing) line of demarcation between us.

*“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”* (vv. 21-23)

It would be quite easy to fall into a logic that says, “those people who do evil things like bombing buses—those people who murder or abuse others simply because they are of a different religion or race or nationality—those people must be entirely *filled* with evil intentions...and since *those people* are *filled* with evil intentions, then *those people* must therefore *be* evil...those people must *be* defiled.

Now, all of us are probably aware of (at least some of) our *own* shortcomings—and of some of the cold and shadowy or angry places in our own hearts...

But surely, we might think, these are *nothing* compared to the devouring darkness that must deform the hearts of suicide bombers and other perpetrators of violence and terror. Surely, *those people* are qualitatively different than you or I...

But...this kind of thinking—this kind of apparently righteous or justified demarcation between *us* and *them*—can *itself* lead to all sorts of violence—from the subtle violence of social or political or religious *exclusion* to the more explosive violence of the suicide bomber or of an officially justified military strike...

When we read “it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come...” and “the things that come out are what defile” it is not difficult to slip unwittingly into concluding that those who produce evil actions are *entirely* evil-hearted—*entirely* defiled—that they are entirely *defined* by their actions—particularly if their actions have involved astonishing violence.

A careless or superficial reading of today’s Gospel *might* lead us to feel justified in drawing this type of distinction.

And even though we *all* get caught up in this type of behavior, it is not what God is calling us to...

In fact, as theologian James Alison observes, the habit of distinguishing between a righteous “us” (or at least a less-bad “us”) and an evil or defiled “them” is actually a way to “...*keep people together* (that is, one group of people together) by enabling them to agree on having someone (that is, someone *else*) who represents what is *not* them—all that is dangerous, unsavoury and evil.” (*Faith Without Resentment*, p. 125)

But there is something else I’d like us to consider as well...

Growing up in a different Christian tradition, I had always read this passage from a very individualistic vantage point—I had automatically assumed that each *individual* was entirely responsible for their own inner life and for the actions that flow from it.

But is this true? *Does* this passage necessarily imply that individuals from whom evil actions emerge are *entirely* and *individually* responsible for those actions? (though clearly we *do* all bear great personal responsibility for our actions).

It had certainly never occurred to me that *I* might possibly bear some responsibility for the inner life of another, or for the actions that another’s life might produce.

But think about it...*do* murder and abuse and other forms of destructive behavior spring *only* from an evil person harboring an inner well of evil intentions?

In what other interior soil might these actions take root? Might bitter and violent actions be rooted in fear? Or hopelessness? Or grief? Or in valid human needs that go continually and achingly unmet?

(Now I am really *not* trying to run headlong into some kind of mushy psychobabble here, but I believe these are important questions to consider...)

Might (some) evil actions have taken root in *normal* human emotions and needs? Might these normal emotions and needs have gotten transformed or *deformed* somewhere along the way? And might this result in bitter fruit of violence and hate?

I’m sure that we can agree that the obvious answer is yes.

But this, of course, raises *more* questions: to what extent are *we* solely responsible for our *own* interior landscape or climate? To what extent are we solely responsible for the soil in which our intentions take root and from which our actions grow?

To what extent might I or might you be (at least) partly responsible for the interior landscape or climate of *another’s* life?

To what degree might our various communities or institutions or nations bear responsibility for the interior landscape of *other* communities or institutions or nations—and therefore, of the actions that emerge from them?

So...here we find ourselves face to face with one of the most ancient of human questions: Am I, after all, my brother's keeper? Am I my sister's keeper?

Or, perhaps a better question might be: *to what extent* am I my brothers' keeper? My sisters' keeper? (and what am I supposed to do about that?)

Again, I am *not* implying that we are not responsible for our own actions or that others bear no responsibility for their actions—we *do* bear great personal responsibility.

I'm just suggesting that the picture is never as clear as we'd like, and that we cannot get away with either intentionally drawing sharp "us-them" distinctions, *or* of slipping into a comfortable if unconscious acceptance of world-views that rely on such divisions...

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I don't know how many of you have seen the movie *Crash*—but I think it has much to teach us here.

The film is set in the US—in California, I think, but with deals with themes that are equally relevant here.

It explores issues of racism and racial hatred and stereotyping. It does this by following the lives of a variety of characters who come from quite varied racial and socioeconomic backgrounds...a wealthy black couple, a wealthy white couple, a Hispanic family, three young black boys, an Asian couple and a family from the Middle East.

In the first few scenes, it is very tempting to think that we—the wise and, of course, fair-minded outsiders—can tell who the good guys and the bad guys are—to think that we can tell *which* characters are the racists and *which* characters are open-minded, tolerant, unbiased—you know, people like *us*...

In one early scene, two white police officers pull over a black couple who were driving home from a party—they had done nothing wrong and there was absolutely *no* reason for the stop (and unfortunately, this does happen with alarming frequency).

The senior officer makes them both get out of the car and lean against it so that he can (ostensibly) search them for weapons...but he chooses to "search" only the wife, which he does in a very slow and very deliberate and very violating way, with the obvious goal of degrading and humiliating her *and* her husband.

While this is going on, it is clear that both husband and wife are clearly struggling with trying to decide whether they should submit to this humiliation in hopes that they will eventually be allowed to go home, or whether they should resist and risk ending up in jail. They choose to submit, though the wife is furious at her husband for not protecting her dignity.

It is an excruciating scene.

Later in the movie, the same couple has a fight. She jumps in their car and drives off—she is crying and distracted and is driving way too fast.

Of course, she gets into an accident. Her car rolls over, landing on its roof. She is tangled in her seat belt and cannot get out. Meanwhile, the gas tank of the other car involved in the accident explodes and bursts into flame, and since some of the gasoline (petrol!) has leaked out and spread in the direction of her car, it is clear that she is in serious and immediate danger.

The police (again, white) arrive on the scene, and without hesitation, one of them runs to her car and begins to crawl in through one of the broken windows.

Freeing her proves more difficult than he had anticipated, and, of course, the flames creep steadily closer and closer to the car in which they are struggling. It is clear that he has enough time to crawl back out of the car and get himself to safety, but it does *not* appear that he has the time to continue to struggle with the straps that are trapping the woman before they are both engulfed in flame. (hey, it's Hollywood...)

At that moment, their eyes lock. It is the same police officer who had humiliated and abused her on that earlier night.

She now struggles violently to get away from him, and he, risking his life, stays and continues to try and free her—which, of course is more difficult now that she is trying to beat him off.

Eventually, he succeeds in cutting the straps and drags her to safety just as the car explodes (like I said, it's Hollywood!).

They say nothing to each other, and as the paramedics help her walk over to the ambulance, she simply stares back over her shoulder at the officer—and he stares back.

There are no further words between them. There is no heart-wrenching scene of confession and forgiveness. There are no mutual tearful confessions of “I’m so sorry—I was all wrong about you!”

But the filmmaker makes it clear that *both* individuals are undergoing *massive* readjustments in their appraisals of one another. Neither can continue to dismiss the other as *entirely* evil or as *entirely* unworthy of respect.

However...the evil that had gone before was *not* negated...the abuse that had taken place previously was *not* erased...the hate did *not* magically evaporate...

What *did* happen, though, was that a small, new window had opened up between them—a window through which they could *just begin to glimpse* a new way of being together...a window through which they could begin to catch a vision of a life together that was *not* warped by hate...

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Good and evil intentions spring from *all* of our hearts...hatred *and* love take root in our inmost selves...all of our lives bring forth *both* good *and* evil actions...

And we are *all* bound together whether we like it or not...

So where is the good news?

I believe that the first piece of good news lies in what this passage does *not* say: Although Jesus *does* imply that we *all* harbor evil and destructive intentions and *all* of our lives are marred by evil and destructive actions, Jesus is *not* (necessarily) saying that we are therefore *defined* by the negative things that emerge in our lives...

In fact, we are invited into a divine process of transformation—of learning to live more completely—of learning to love and to be loved...

The logic of the suicide bomber is that one must die in order that many may *die*.

The logic of the Gospel is that one has lived—and died—so that many may *live*...so that many can answer God's invitation to transformation...God's invitation to enter into a process of healing...to allow ourselves to be drawn into a more complete divine love—as we allow God to enter the shadowy or cold or hateful or angry places in our own hearts—and find ourselves loved in spite of them.

But this work of transformation and forgiveness...this process of being *unbound* from the hate that produces a *false* unity...this process of learning to love is difficult. But it is what God is calling us to...

Fortunately, as James Alison observes, God invites us to “faith that allows us the space to flail and splutter with pain as we are called into our rightful being...” (Faith Beyond Resentment, p. 135)

Alison also claims that God calls us to *pity*—which he redefines. Pity, in his vision, is *not* simply a warm fuzzy feeling that flows downhill from a superior person to an inferior person...

He describes it as “...a certain sort of *longing* (a kind of *hunger*), creatively imagining the possibility and glory of *joining with others in being unbound*. As the anger, the grasping at belonging, the comparison which reinforces self-approval, begins to collapse, so this very mysterious longing pity takes its place...This pity reaches right back into the heart of the Creator...It enables us to intuit something of the visceral movement of love which led God to come among us as one of us at all.” (p. 143)

We've probably all heard the verse of the Easter hymn which boldly proclaims,  
“Love's redeeming work is done,  
fought the fight, the battle won...”

Now, I am *not* entirely convinced that the hymn writer got it exactly right...it certainly seems that love's redeeming work is *not* actually finished, and, from all appearances, the battle is not won *yet*, but surely, love's redeeming work *is* in progress, and we are *all* invited to join in...

--the Rev'd Jacqueline R. Cameron