

Mark Ralls

Confronting Evil in Ourselves

Saddam is evil.” President Bush made this blunt statement near the end of 2001 about our new national enemy. The latest installment of post 9/11 rhetoric came at a time when the once forgotten theological categories of good and evil were making a stunning public comeback. Some are pleased that we are rediscovering traditional moral language to make sense of our experience. Others cringe when they hear the word “evil,” considering it a metaphysical relic we should have long ago outgrown.

I guess I am somewhere in the middle. As a pastor, I am grateful for the opportunity such rhetoric provides. Rarely have so many people openly discussed theology. Yet, I worry when evil is used as a descriptive term and applied to specific persons. My concern is that we may be leaving behind the traditional Christian notion of evil as privation.

In a similar way that we understand cancer as a deviation from a healthy cell, blindness as being without sight and suffocation as the lack of oxygen, we know evil only as *privatio boni*, the absence of the good. This means that any attempt to

understand the nature of evil begins, not with evil itself, but with a consideration of goodness.

What Is “Good”?

The first question to ask is not “what is evil?” but “what is good?” This we learn from Genesis. After creating the heavens and the earth, God called them good. So, we derive our understanding of goodness from God’s act of creation. Whatever God brings into being is blessed and made good. In a beautifully rendered exegesis of Genesis 1, Cornelius Plantinga observes that at first “everything in the universe is all jumbled together” in a “formless void”:

So God begins to do some creative separating: he separates light from darkness, day from night, water from land, the sea creatures from the land cruiser.... At the same time God binds things together: he binds humans to the rest of creation as stewards..., to himself as the bearers of his image, and to each other as perfect complements.¹

Creation is an intricate pattern of separate entities bound together for a common good. It is our deep connection – to God, to the world, to each other – that God blesses and calls good.

Evil occurs when this connection is ruptured. Arising out of human vandalism, evil is a consequence of our tearing apart what God has bound together. This is what Augustine meant when he described evil as non-being. Evil is not part of God's creation. It is the space between, the tear itself, the breach that alienates. This, of course, is not to deny the reality of evil. Its substance is not imaginary. Evil is as real as a wound or the absence of air, and like both of these it kills through minute, imperceptible advances.

This traditional view implies that we should avoid thinking of evil as a personal attribute. To tie evil to any single person tricks us into thinking that evil can be accurately detected and dispensed with through human resolve. Evil is everywhere and nowhere at once, symbolic shorthand for all that has gone wrong in the world. To call a specific person evil is to suggest that she is qualitatively different from the rest of us; a personification of the breach itself. Yet, it is impossible for anyone to be evil. Evil is non-being and to become evil is to cease to be. Worse still, when we call another evil, we risk forgetting our own complicity. Saddam Hussein, for instance, may be evil in a different way than us but we all take part in evil in some sense. All are estranged from what God has blessed. Each of us participates in non-being and may come to live so completely in the breach, that we are depleted, becoming little more than conduits of nothingness.

In his World War II diary, J. Glenn Gray describes reading the words of a German soldier in a newspaper. He was quoted as saying that in the midst of the long war, he had lost his *Ich* (the German word for "I"), his sense of self. Gray resonated with this feeling, writing, "I shuttered. He spoke for me...." Later, after failing to be moved by the sight of a dead German soldier, Gray continued, "Somehow I have grown quite hard in the past months ... God in Heaven, help me keep my humanity."²

The Banality of Evil

A more famous example can be found in Hannah Arendt's reflections on war criminal Adolf Eichmann; the Nazi "Jewish specialist" who became one of the primary architects of the Holocaust. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,³ Arendt considered the nature of Eichmann's evil. She came to the controversial conclusion that despite the horrific consequences of his actions, there was nothing unusual about Eichmann himself. Apparently, he was motivated not by sadistic intent but by the all-too-common longing for professional advancement. He was, Arendt surmised, not diabolical but merely banal; a strikingly ordinary person complicit in an evil that overwhelmed him. Her conclusion infuriated many readers. It seemed to diminish the gravity of Eichmann's crime and to absolve him from genuine responsibility. If

Eichmann was fundamentally no different than the rest of us then in what sense can we say what his crimes demand we must say: that Adolf Eichmann is evil?

This concern reveals that when we call another person evil, it may have little to do with feelings of moral superiority. A more likely impetus is fear. One of the few means we have to insulate ourselves from horrors such as the Holocaust is to convince ourselves that those who commit such atrocities are fundamentally different from us. For this reason, thoroughly wicked fictional characters, from Shakespeare's Iago to Hannibal Lecter, not only fascinate us but also provide an odd sense of comfort. They reassure us that evil is exceptional. "If

only there were evil people somewhere," Alexander Solzhenitsyn muses, "and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them." If evil is ordinary and W. H. Auden is correct that it "sleeps in our bed and eats at our table," then the fragile compact of human society is more vulnerable than we ever imagined.

Yet, banal not only signals the ordinary or commonplace. It also means shallow. And, for Arendt, the surest evidence of Eichmann's evil was not the wickedness of his intentions but the superficiality of his convictions. She observed that Eichmann simply could not put himself in the place of others. This left him morally hollow, unable to recognize the consequences of his actions or acknowledge the ties that bind us together.

Hannah Arendt's depiction of the "banality of evil" may give us pause when we find that in our own society moral shallowness has become commonplace. Shortly after the Columbine tragedy, art historian, David Hickey noted that what most characterizes "these killer children from the suburbs is their absolute lack of imagination.... They can't imagine obliterating a million hopes, dreams and

memories by squeezing a tiny metal trigger. They can't imagine the empty space they are making in succeeding generations. They can't even imagine their own futures." Our troubled youth reflect a hollow culture characterized by diminished ethical expectations: a culture that no longer possesses a coherent vision of goodness.

In one of her early essays, Joan Didion wrote that the self-sufficiency of Howard Hughes is the dream that most Americans have in common. In a context where the good is reduced to "the good life"—an individualistic pursuit of greater health, leisure and material possessions—the church has a unique mission. If we dare to speak of good and evil in terms that carry us beyond contemporary rhetoric, then we can provide an alternative to the illusory dream of autonomy.

Pilgrimage to the Cross

Perhaps, we can rediscover our deepest connections during this season of Lent as we share in a pilgrimage to the cross. Here, we both confess our complicity in evil and acknowledge that any good

**Evil is a consequence
of our tearing apart
what God has bound together.
Evil is not part of
God's creation.
It is the space between,
the tear itself,
the breach that alienates.
This, of course, is not to deny
the reality of evil.
Its substance is not imaginary.
Evil is as real as a wound
or the absence of air, and
like both of these it kills
through minute,
imperceptible advances.**



capable of sustaining us must come from beyond our human capacity.

In his novel, *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry's protagonist is a pre-ministerial student dropout who learns more about good and evil as a small-town barber than he ever did through his studies. Near the end of his life, Jayber comes to the following conclusion: "We are too tightly tangled together

If the suffering of Christ on the cross is an endless, eschatological event so too is his resurrection, offering us genuine hope that what we have torn asunder, God will once again bind together.

to be able to separate ourselves from one another either by good or by evil. We are involved in all and any good, and in all and any evil. For any sin, we all suffer. That is why our suffering is endless. It is why God grieves and Christ's wounds are still bleeding."⁴ Yet, if the suffering of Christ on the cross is an endless, eschatological event so too is his resurrection, offering us genuine hope that what we have torn asunder, God will once again bind together. □

¹ *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* by Cornelius Plantinga (Erdman, 1995) p. 29.

² Quoted in *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press, 1999) p. 50.

³ *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* by Hannah Arendt (Viking Press, 1963).

⁴ *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry (Counterpoint, 2000) p. 295.



Mark Ralls is pastor of St. Timothy United Methodist Church in Brevard, North Carolina.



**coming together
to transform
one church...
YOURS!**

**Pastoral
SUMMIT
2003**

The Pastoral Summit offers a rich blend of best practices, approaches, and programs, Protestant and Catholic, from all regions of the country—from large churches and small, urban, suburban, rural and small town. A full array of workshops led by over 50 clergy and lay pastoral experts, who know first-hand the complexities and tremendous possibilities in local churches, make each gathering of Pastoral Summit 2003 a truly extraordinary experience.

Come to Pastoral Summit 2003—in San Antonio or Indianapolis or Boston—and experience not only the practical wisdom, but the synergy of people with a passion for local church excellence, people alive to the Spirit of God working in their lives and the world.

— Paul Wilkes, Pastoral Summit Founder & Project Director

Keynote Speakers

San Antonio April 28-30



RUBY BRIDGES, immortalized by Norman Rockwell's famous painting as she bravely integrated her school, tells of the faith that has infused her life.



R. SCOTT APPLEBY of Notre Dame provides a sweeping analysis of what is happening in our churches today.

Indianapolis June 17-19

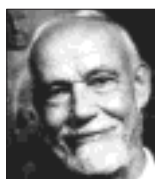


FATHER DONALD COZZENS, author of *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, provides insight and hope for the church.



REV. KEN FONG, a foremost evangelical pastor, looks at the new evangelicals and how they are changing the face of religious belief.

Boston October 6-8



HUSTON SMITH, the renowned expert on world religions, sees the local church as still the place where most people find and practice their faith.



ALICE MCDERMOTT, the National Book Award - winning author, tells of the profound impact of Catholic faith in her life and work.

For information:

PASTORAL SUMMIT 2003
13502 Whittier Blvd. Suite H-316
Whittier, CA 90605-1944
staff@pastoralsummit.org

Or visit:

www.pastoralsummit.org

Pastoral Summit 2003 is made possible through a grant from the Lilly Endowment, and in conjunction with the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame.