

The Lost Language of

Sin and Evil

Thomas Gildemeister

I knew we were in trouble when, shortly after 9/11, a well-known TV commentator suggested that we refrain from calling these attacks “evil.” He continued to say that we must seek to understand the attackers, and not condemn them. Having spent some time in Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Israel, I am sympathetic to the outrage of Palestinian and other Arab people caused by U.S. and British foreign policy. But if the attempt to kill, not 3,000, but 10’s of thousands of Pentagon and downtown Manhattan office workers is not evil, what is?

Evil seems to have developed a bad name. Sin could use a public relations overhaul as well. No, I do not mean to suggest that sin and evil have any redeemable qualities. But outside the language found in the liturgies for Baptism and Holy Communion, when is the last time you heard the words “sin” and “evil” in a worship service? One has to wonder to what extent not only United Methodists, but most post-modern Protestants still believe that evil actually exists in the world.

A Brief Survey of Scripture

If we take a brief survey of scripture, we will discover that the biblical writers did not have any problems reflecting upon evil and sin by name. According to my concordance, evil and sin occur in the Bible over 600 and 500 times respectively. One might guess that this preponderance of the “e” and “s” words is a phenomenon unique to the Old Testament. Many churchgoers view the Old Testament, with its bare-knuckle language and stories, as the New Testament’s tacky, uncouth cousin who can embarrass us in front of our enlightened friends.

But one would be wrong. The New Testament is, in fact, generous in its use of both “evil” and “sin.” The Gospels alone contain over 50 explicit references to evil. Paul’s letters and the general epistles use it over 60 times. The New Testament treatment of “sin” is no different, with over 100 references. We cannot simply ignore these words and the need to struggle with their meaning. They will continue to surface in lectionary readings, *Disciple Bible* studies, and the like. The last 30 years demonstrates that if we don’t deal with the concepts of evil and sin, other religious traditions with truly disturbing theologies are happy to deal with them for us.

Why have we grown so uncomfortable with the language of evil and sin? The problem raised by theodicy is a main culprit. If God is all loving and all-powerful, how can evil exist in the world? Or why do righteous or innocent people, especially children, suffer? If the Book of Job is any indication, theologians have struggled with these questions since the beginning of human consciousness. And while many of their attempts to resolve this age-old quandary are sensitive and convincing, none are very helpful to the parent whose child has been kidnapped and murdered, or the young woman whose comatose husband was diagnosed with cancer a week after their honeymoon.

To be candid, I suspect that these explanations of theodicy aren't very convincing to anyone. Rather than breaking our souls upon these rocks of theological nuance, we church people just stop talking about these issues.

Religious Abuse

There are other reasons for our uneasiness with evil and sin. I serve a growing suburban church that is located in a sea of very conservative, independent churches. Recently, a young woman called my office, and introduced herself as happily married, a lifelong church member, the mother of two girls, and a career-oriented professional. She had a graduate degree and formal musical training. In other words, I was talking with a well-educated, highly cultured person of faith.

She and her family had visited our worship service, and my sermon had reflected upon God's unconditional love and grace. It struck a responsive chord, but she wanted to know if I really meant it. I was somewhat startled by her question, but then I laughed, and said yes, that I occasionally try to preach with integrity. Although she chuckled for a moment, she added quickly that she needed to find a church that taught

God's love and not God's anger. She had grown up in a church that constantly hammered away at its members, telling them that they were evil and doomed to hell. And as much as these depraved church members had tormented Jesus with their sin, so the story goes, God still might grudgingly allow them to

sneak into heaven. But it's doubtful. Although she said her family enjoyed the high energy, contemporary worship of her former denomination, she always felt heavy and beaten-down after each service. She asked me, "Do you ever try to scare the Hell out of the congregation?" Those were her exact words.

Most pastors could tell a dozen stories like this one. Religious abuse is real. Abusive pastors and other church leaders, with their abusive theologies, are more prevalent than we realize—so prevalent that some counselors' very full client rosters are

now comprised entirely of the religiously abused. The words "evil" and "sin" can be used like clubs to pound the life out of already troubled folk, leaving them spiritually and emotionally dead. And so, we shouldn't be too surprised with the widespread aversion to the language of evil and sin.

Psychologizing of Evil

A correction is in order, but is the church's only remedy to eschew this traditional language altogether and find an alternative voice to speak to and for God-starved seekers? Frankly, this not-so-subtle shift has been underway for over 30 years. A new language has been imported into the church, the language of psychology, or more accurately, pop-psychology. "Evil" and "sin" have been replaced with "broken," "wounded," and "unhealthy choices." We speak of self-esteem (feeling good about ourselves) far more than personal accountability (which is often painful). We ask our congregations to examine their family of origin or their inner child, and not their patterns of self-destructive behavior.

We have lost the language of evil and sin because we have fundamentally confused ontological categories with ethical categories. Sin and evil do not describe who we are, but how we act.

Let's celebrate the gentle benefits of these changes, recognizing that most attempts at theological correction usually result in over-correction (cf., Barth's correction of the excesses of Harnack and the "Liberal Theologians.") And such is the case with this psychologizing of evil and sin. When we lose the authentic language of evil and sin, we are threatened with the possibility of moral weightlessness. If there is no darkness, no evil, and no sin, then there can be no light, no goodness, and no love. Consequently, all that remains for people of faith is to wallow in cheap grace, as we go crashing about in an amoral universe.

We have lost the language of evil and sin because we have fundamentally confused ontological categories with ethical categories. Sin and evil do not describe who we are, but how we act. A thorough investigation of the biblical witness reveals that the overwhelming majority of the 1,100 references to sin and evil describe human activity, not human essence. We are uneasy branding someone an "evil person," as well we should be. And we have every right to squirm when such an epithet is leveled at us. At the same time, the Church has the responsibility to name any behavior that opposes God's project of increasing love and justice in the world for what it is—evil and sinful.

Now, we have the language to understand and love the person, while condemning his or her behavior as evil...if we will only use it. I submit that open and frank conversations about human choices and their propensity to oppose the Kingdom and not further it will lead to healthier individuals building healthier communities of faith.

And besides, it's high time that evil and sin make a comeback in the Church. □



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