# «Evil, Trauma, and Ambiguity»

## Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, May 24, 2009
## The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

How many of you here this morning would say you don't believe in evil? How many of you would say you believe people can be guilty of evil acts? How many of you would say that the little boy in the story this morning thought about committing an evil act?

Unitarian Universalists do not talk about evil much. Most liberal faith traditions do not. We tend to stay on the sunny side of human experience. We talk about love, community, justice… but not evil. I remember after 9/11, 2001, Unitarian Universalist ministers were scrambling, confused about how to talk about what had just happened, because we had been taught to talk about good people doing good things. We were taught not to judge others, but to understand others; to respect their inherent worth and dignity. Yet evil seemed close at hand that day and clergy struggled with what to say. We were reminded that human nature is anything but benign.

What is evil? We know, first of all that the word itself carries a powerful punch. To seriously call someone or some group evil is not something we should take lightly. Webster defines evil as something that is morally bad or wrong; wicked; depraved; causing pain or trouble; harmful; injurious; threatening. After 9/11, the *UU World*, asked some of our ministers to weigh in on their definitions of evil and here are some of their responses (Jan/Feb, 2002). See if any of these definitions resonate with your own thoughts. Gordon McKeeman says. "Evil comes into the world when our 'good' comes into conflict with other's 'good'". William Jones says, "evil is a label, a term for someone else's interests that conflict with our own." Thandeka says, "evil is the failure to understand the inherent worth and dignity of every person as part of the interdependent web of all existence." David Loehr offers, "evil is constricting life into a smaller vision."

Beautiful definitions. Shortly after this article was written, the faculty at Meadville Lombard Theological School decided to put together an ethics course called "evil, trauma and ambiguity" which I took and from which the title for this sermon originates. The first day of class, our professor asked how many of us believed in evil and hardly a hand went up. Those who did raise their hands were then asked for a definition. Answers were similar to those you've just heard. After all, Seminary students are not all that original and we all read UU World. Then she asked each of us to tell a story of an evil we had witnessed or experienced in our own lives. And one by one, students opened up and described crimes and actions that defy belief.

What we learned from that experience is this: the kinds of definitions we like to put around the word evil cannot hold what it feels like for the victim of an evil act.

What is evil, then? Deliver us from evil, says one of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Jeffrey Means[1], one of the authors we read for our class, writes that evil is a process that destroys the selves and souls of persons. The discrete events that make up this process of evil are events of trauma. Trauma, Webster tells us, is a bodily injury, wound or shock; or a painful emotional experience, often producing a lasting psychic shock. Evil, therefore always manifests as physical or psychic trauma. Means explains that the more trauma is created and directed at hurting a person or group, or manifests as a disregard for the selfhood of another, the more we are dealing with evil rather than trauma. Means also writes that we can recognize that we are dealing with evil when the symptoms of the trauma we cause – symptoms such as hopelessness, helplessness, shame, or fear – when these symptoms are produced, heighten or used by the perpetrator in such a way that healing of the victim is frustrated or discouraged, we are dealing with evil.

In its broadest terms, then, evil can be looked at as something that infiltrates our lives on a daily basis. When harm is done and reconciliation and healing are discouraged, when the relational nature of life is ignored, evil is possible. Means also talks about institutional evils that our culture accepts all the time – racism, heterosexism, inadequate health care, a free market economy with inadequate regulation. Some of you may have a difficult time thinking of these things as "evil" as Means does. What we define as evil will always be ambiguous, with the boundaries unclear, on a sliding scale of one to ten, say. Means suggests that the subtleties of definition will depend upon four qualifications: first, to what degree did we make a conscious decision to act in this way? Second, is our action passive or active? In other words, did we fail to prevent harm or did we actively create the harm? Third, was there intention to do harm? And fourth, how long did the harm continue?

How and why does evil happen? I am defining the word as something that happens from one person to another. It is entirely relational, so that I would not call the effects of a hurricane Katrina as evil, even though much trauma occurred. Even institutional effects can be considered evil because institutions are made up of people in relationship. Evil happens because each of us becomes broken individuals from living in a broken, inhospitable world.

There is a lot of research currently being done regarding the development of the various parts of the brain that are activated during the ethical decision-making process, looking for the reasons why those areas may be undeveloped, underdeveloped, or over-ridden through circumstance.[2] I do not have the expertise to discuss these studies in detail, but I do know that none of us escapes completely the brokenness that comes from being here. This is what the myth of the fall in the Garden of Eden is all about. We all carry the capability of evil; we all reside somewhere on the scale of one to ten in that capability – one being a Mother Teresa perhaps and ten being an Adolf Hilter; somewhere on this scale of humanity between sainthood and sociopath are you and I. This knowledge should make us all humble. The reason the story of the little boy holding the bird in his hand is so vivid for us is because we can see ourselves in his dilemma.

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[1] Means, Jeffrey. *Trauma and Evil: Healing the Wounded Soul.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/22/science/22brain.html

The truth is, we are afraid to talk about evil because it is a scary thing. And it scares us, not only because it might be lurking somewhere out *there*, but because it might be lurking somewhere in *here*. This is why we've been taught not to judge harshly – not because evil doesn't exist, but because it exists in each of us. The wide spectrum of evil makes it difficult to see, difficult to sometimes feel in ourselves, and steps into evil are often small and subtle.

I have a story about how easily it can sneak up on you. I recently spent three days at the beach on a retreat with some other women. I decided before I left that it was going to be a real retreat for me – I was not going to be anyone's partner, or parent, or minister, or friend. I was going to absolve myself from all care taking responsibilities, all problem solving, for three days, because I felt like I needed it and deserved it. But on the second evening of the retreat one of the women in the group started teasing another. At first it seemed humorous, and then we all started feeling a little uncomfortable as the teasing became bullying. And I remembered my promise to myself about not having to take care of anyone. I deserved it, right? And anyway, wasn't it the responsibility of the retreat leaders to take control of this? And so I sat there with the others, silently watching as this woman became more and more embarrassed, finally breaking into tears before escaping to her room. We were all on retreat from being responsible humans beings.

One of the most amazing things I hear people say is, "I am a good person." How do they know that about themselves? To me, to say, "I am trying to be a good person," makes more sense. I know for myself, my personal sense of goodness is nuanced, because I struggle with ordinary temptations like anger, greediness, or just plain old moral laziness. The Bible, especially the Old Testament[3], encourages us to look at good and evil as two polar opposites. We *desire* to be good; we *envy* wicked people who seem to be getting rich at our expense; we *fear* those evil terrorists who may escape our federal prisons and walk among us if we close Guantanamo Bay. Envy and fear are in fact the two most common responses to evil. We split ourselves off from it, declaring, "I am a good person" when what we really mean is "I am not one of them!"

How *might* we respond to this trauma-inducing, ambiguous, often subtle thing we call evil? I think first of all we need to learn to respect and understand the power of our own woundedness and its potential for creating evil. We have to learn to recognize evil tendencies in ourselves as individuals. Where am I defensively splitting myself off from others, creating us vs. them mentality? Where do I see the same dynamic working in the culture around me and in our institutions? This kind of recognition means that.

Secondly, as a faith community we need to make sure we support one another as we struggle to put traumatic events into some context of meaning. That we help heal one another from our mutual hurts; that we protect one another from future hurts to the best of our ability. The grand paradox about evil is that even as evil depends on relationship, so does the healing that takes place afterward. And this is the case for both victim and perpetrator. Whereas evil-doers attack the relational nature of life, it is healthy relationships, where trust can be found, where an attitude of

[3] See several of the Psalms

reverence for life is made manifest, where the complexities of relationships are appreciated, that heal our brokenness.

The abilities of a covenanted community of faith such as ours to restore broken people to health are downplayed these days, especially among Unitarian Universalists. But it is my firm conviction that some people may be more readily reached, even healed, by communities of faith than by other means. This is also true of both victims and perpetrators. If we accept both into our midst, there will always exist a tension between the real and vital need to protect ourselves from harm and providing a healing community to those who have caused harm. May we begin to address that tension by being more gently attuned and appreciative of the hurts we all carry within us.

May it be so, and blessed be.