

THE LOST LANGUAGE OF SALVATION
GENESIS 2:15-17, 3:1-13; MATTHEW 4:1-11
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If ever the lost language of salvation, the language of sin and evil is going to work its way back into everyday speech it will take more than September 11th to do it. There was a lot of talk about evil after the atrocities committed that day. But the farther away we get from 9/11 – President Bush’s “axis of evil” speech notwithstanding – the less I hear “evil” being used to describe it.

One of Yale’s leading history professors reflects on 9/11 in an article entitled, “The Lessons of Terrorism.” He says he lectures each day to future leaders of the civilized world...four of the last six presidents having graduated from Yale. So he started a weekly luncheon to hear what the students have to say to him. His first luncheon was on September 12, 2001.

By and large the “lessons of terrorism” Professor Gaddis and his students offer are somewhat thoughtful but disappointing. 9/11 has led to a good deal of patriotism they observe – no small feat for an Ivy League campus. In addition, there is strong feeling the University is too removed from the nation. Others say 9/11 caused deeper thinking about what we value and why.ⁱ But I wish somewhere in my alumni magazine the professor or his students would have considered the question of human nature. What makes us tick? Why do we go so badly astray?

Then came the *New Yorker*. The usually insightful “Talk of the Town” column was similarly off the mark. Hendrik Hertzberg riffed on President Bush’s “axis of evil.”

On the one hand he offered an analysis dismantling the existence or threat of such an alliance. He then went on to reveal the real motive for the term – to send a message to Saddam Hussein: we will finish the job George Bush, Sr. started.ⁱⁱ

For an article purporting to be about evil there was little definition of the term let alone any application of it to life of nations.

Enron has been some help getting us to probe human nature. The *New Yorker* did have some decent cartoons. A business executive sitting at his desk with the “in” box, “out” box, and “destroyed without my knowledge” box in front of him. A few pages later another executive sitting in his opulent office next to a bust of himself on a Greek column, wondering aloud not “What Would Jesus Do?” but “What Would Satan Do?”ⁱⁱⁱ

I wonder if our failure to probe more deeply the causes of 9/11 – much like Ted Turner did not long ago but was roundly criticized for when he suggested the gap between rich and poor nations is one reason for 9/11 – maybe our failure to look at ourselves self-critically has allowed this corporate implosion called Enron for which those collapsing Trade Center Towers are not a bad metaphor. Only the people flying the planes were not Islamic fundamentalists but upstanding American corporate leaders – some no doubt with Yale degrees.

Soon we’ll be looking back on Enron as a violation of the public trust and federal law but I seriously doubt as sinful acts committed by sinful men.

I want to talk with you today and through these Sundays of Lent about sin: the lost language of salvation. Why is it we no longer use the language of sin? Is it good for anything? Or like those Elizabethan words ending in “eth” is it simply too antique and outmoded for our modern world?

I realize to even refer to “sin” “evil” “repentance” and “righteousness” as I will be doing over these weeks is to cross a cultural line in the sand. On one side of the line is an increasingly marginalized and under siege Alamo of “sacred” culture. On the other side, the pervasive values and norms of secular society.

This line in our western culture was first drawn by French philosophers of the 18th century. But to use my Alamo metaphor Santa Ana and his forces started rallying at the border somewhere around the end of the 19th century. By the time Mae West graced the screen in the 20th century she could say with regard to the lesser and greater evils, “Between the two evils, I always choose the one I haven’t tried before.” An amusing line but one that reveals the culture of hedonism we relish and protect.

There are good reasons we don’t like the language of sin. The threat of sin and promise of salvation, says one preacher, sounds too much like part of the old control mechanism for keeping people in line – women, blacks, and homosexuals to name a few.^{iv}

Too often and for too long the language of sin has been used to make people wallow in guilt in order to get them to adhere to an institution or follow a leader. Such language has been used to make people feel inherently bad and unworthy.

Too much emphasis on sin and evil will drive people away, say not a few church consultants. Besides, now that we know so much more than our primitive ancestors, we know that evil is really a synonym for ignorance.^v

The language of sin has become unstitched from our day to day experience. “Religious language has been replaced by the language of spirituality,” says Barbara Brown Taylor, “which uses gentler words such as ‘stress-reduction,’ ‘empowerment,’ and ‘harmony.’” The question is do these words really help you and me to understand the darker realms of human experience, where power is a problem, not an asset, and harmony is a distant memory from a life that ended long ago?

Without the language of sin we have downsized the very things we call sin. Suicide, divorce and addiction are no longer considered sinful by large segments of the population. Nor are cohabitation and having children out of wedlock, says Taylor. Sex before marriage is so routine virgin brides and grooms are as rare as comets. We call lying “spin” and greed “motivation.”

What is to be gained from condemning such things, when people are going to do them anyway? Why not respect the individual’s freedom to choose, since it is the individual who will bear the consequences? Nowadays the only sins likely to be condemned in church are low attendance, poor stewardship, and failure to sign up for committees.^{vi}

Back in the 1970s, Karl Menninger, a psychiatrist who wrote a book entitled, “Whatever Became of Sin” was the first to note that the language of sin has been replaced with the language of medicine and law.

The really bad cases of wrongdoing are turned over to the courts as crimes. The more self-destructive things are turned over to the medical establishment as mental illness, Dr. Menninger says. There has been a shift in the responsibility for evil.^{vii}

Social agencies and institutions funded by the federal government now accept responsibility for ministering to those who are dysfunctional and end up in prison or the hospital. The distinction between crime, sickness and sin has to do with the kind of professional management administered.

But I seriously question whether categories of dysfunction or pathology or recovery do justice to the self-knowledge and self-awareness we need to embark as followers of Jesus on the road to transformation and new life.

What I'd like to propose this morning and over the weeks ahead is that the language of sin is as relevant and needed today as ever precisely because of the connection between language and experience. The more we probe the core of the human experience the more we will find that the ability to recognize and name sin is, paradoxically, our only hope.

We will explore this thoroughly through these Lenten Sundays but today let me make just a couple of points about our experience of evil.

First, evil is real.^{viii} A few weeks ago I quoted Rabbi Harold Kushner's new book in which he refers to the "yetzer ha-ra" in each one of us. The impulse to evil. The reason the church on earth is referred to as the church militant is because it understands itself to be in a state of constant warfare with a real antagonist whose troops are legion and resources without limit. To deny this reality is to take the first step toward moral defeat.

Like the famous test for pornography – we know it when we see it – so too we know evil when we experience it. Adam and Eve knew it was wrong to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Cain knew he should neither be envious of nor murder his brother Abel. Jacob knew he should not have cheated his brother Esau of his birthright. David knew it was wrong to lust after Bathsheba and arrange her husband Uriah's death. St. Paul knew of the good he could not do and the bad he did. Jesus knew Satan's offer was the offer of death.

One of the coming of age memories I have is the after school fights I witnessed at my junior high school in the City of Pittsburgh. Always a large crowd, two kids usually boys, sometimes girls at the center flailing at each other with bloody faces and torn clothes. Later in college, when I lived for a time in Americus, GA at the Koinonia Farm where Habitat for Humanity started I canvassed doctors and dentists' offices in the city to record which ones were still segregated. Nine of 24 had separate waiting rooms, fountains and toilets for colored and whites. Evil is real.

Secondly, evil has a brain. Peter Gomes uses the metaphor of cancer. Evil has a brain and strategy and millennia of experience. A will of its own never to be underestimated. It attacks those places we feel confident, hence places we neglect, says Gomes. Therefore, people in positions of moral guidance are vulnerable to evil at those points where moral strength is felt to be sufficiently strong that it can be neglected.

This may explain the phenomenon of the abuse of moral trust in the helping professions among doctors, priests, counselors and clergy.

It certainly explains the warped and widespread notion in Germany in 1939 of a superior Aryan race. On October 22 of that year at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford, England, C.S. Lewis preached a sermon to an anxious crowd of undergraduates. No doubt many were wondering what they were doing studying mathematics or metaphysics at a time when their nation was in mortal peril. Days later many would enlist in the army.

“If we had foolish hope about human culture, it is now shattered,” said Lewis.

“If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the souls of men and women we are disillusioned and not a moment too soon.” The threat of war and the possibility of death merely magnify what is the permanent condition of human life.^{ix}

Evil has a strategy and a will. We do well, as C.S. Lewis says, to be vigilantly cognizant of it – unlike the aloof reflections of the Yale professor. If nothing else, we need a name for evil and we need to use it.

Finally, we need all the help we can get. You and I cannot combat evil, especially evil within, on our own. We cannot be good by ourselves. One of the first defenses against evil is to acknowledge that someone needs help against it. That is the strength of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Confession is good for the soul not only because it cleanses our spiritual arteries of that which clogs them but also because, in the words of Dr. Gomes, it tags evil. Evil’s greatest ally is silence. I’ll never forget visiting Romania just ten years after the overthrow of one of the most ruthless dictators in Eastern Europe. Romania I felt then and feel now will not finally be whole until the thousands of stories of oppression and injustice are told. Just as any kind of domestic violence and abuse exists solely in and because of the silence of the children or wife of the abuser.

It is why confession is so important. Confession of sins helps articulate what the sins are, acknowledges the trespass, calls upon God and the community to witness the confession and to assist in the amendment of life. Confession reassures the one who confesses that he or she is not alone either in the sin or in the redemption from it. If we learn anything from the Bible we learn that Satan, the personification of evil, is not interested in the wicked, but in the righteous. With evil working overtime, says Dr. Gomes, virtue cannot be a hobby.

What I’d like to explore in the weeks ahead is where we go once we start with a baseline that evil is real and we are sinful people. It will lead us to self-understanding no other language can bestow of who we are and what our task in life is.

But for today I want to close with the advice one parent gave his child in the wake of the September 11th tragedies. “My child, the world is always a dangerous and threatening place where death surrounds us. When I brought you for baptism I acknowledged that I could not possibly guarantee your future. I handed you over to the God who loves you and with whom you are safe in life and in death.

There is no security to be found anywhere else, certainly not from me or those like me. Live with courage, therefore, and, if it must be, do not be afraid to die in the service of what is good and just.”^x Amen.

Endnotes:

ⁱ John Lewis Gaddis, “The Lessons of Terrorism,” Yale Alumni Magazine, February 2002, 38.

ⁱⁱ Hendrik Hertzberg, “Talk of the Town,” The New Yorker, February 11, 2002, 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ P.Byrnes, The New Yorker, February 18 and 25, 2002, 98.

^{iv} Barbara Brown Taylor, Speaking of Sin: the lost language of salvation (Cambridge: Cowley Press, 2000) 28.

^v Peter Gomes, The Good Book: reading the bible with mind and heart, (New York: Avon Books, 1996) 246.

^{vi} Taylor, 30.

^{vii} Taylor, 33.

^{viii} I am indebted to Peter Gomes for his identification of the following three points: evil is real, evil has a brain and we need all the help we can get from his essay “The Bible and Evil” in The Good Book.

^{ix} Gilbert Meilaender, “After September 11,” The Christian Century, September 26-October 3, 2001, 8.

^x Meilaender, 8.