

The San Francisco Swedenborgian Church
September 16, 2001 Worship Service

Do not be Overcome by Evil, But Overcome Evil with Good

Transcript of the sermon by Rev. Dr. Rachel Rivers

Scripture References: Romans 8:35; 37-39, 12:17-19; 21; Luke 6:27-36

When we human beings find ourselves in dangerous situations, we become afraid. That's built into our physiology and our psychology. When we're in danger, we become afraid. And then that fear tends to manifest into a whole spectrum of emotions, from anger to depression. Once the immediate danger is over, it's important for us to pay attention to what feelings have arisen inside of us. Anger and depression are coping mechanisms as a way of trying to respond in a crisis, to try to stabilize ourselves, and to defend and protect ourselves for the time being. But it is believed that both anger and depression are what we call secondary emotions. That means there are other primary emotions within them, such as fear. It's important that, if we are not to become prisoners to those emotions of anger and depression, that we be able to name what is coming up for us, to give words to those emotions. Rage; Hopelessness — what else? Terror; Sadness — what else are you feeling today?

Congregation answered: "Numbness; Powerless; Helpless; Confusion; Determination; Despair; Distress; Dread; Resolve."

Once we are in touch with what those feelings are, the next step is to remember that love is stronger than any of them. These feelings come from a very primitive place inside of us, a very, very human and primal place. They are young and vulnerable parts of us. And it's important that we take all of those feelings and, just as if they were a child and we were holding them in our arms, that we let ourselves express those feelings but within the comfort of a love that is far greater than any of them.

Another way to come to terms with what is happening and how it is affecting us is to breathe in all those states you just said, and to let them flow through us. This is a Buddhist exercise: to actually breathe in those fearful, angry, hopeless, depressed states and to breathe out peace. This helps us know that love is the greater reality.

Another way is to actually picture in this little sanctuary all of those heavy emotions that we mentioned. And at the same time imagine this little church being cradled in the arms of God. Can you picture that? Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

There's an extraordinary danger facing us not only as a nation through actual physical attacks and fears of future attacks, but there's also a danger in how we respond to this evil. While the depression and the anger and all the feelings in between are natural and healthy responses to what has occurred, there is a danger in staying stuck in any of those feelings and that's why it's important to let them flow through. If we stay stuck in them and let them control us, then we're in danger of being overcome by evil. Evil can kill us. It's real and it's dangerous, not only to the body, but to the spirit. The way that it kills the spirit is either through depression, through hopelessness, through despair, through thinking there is no hope or through anger. The danger of operating out of anger is that we may become the very evil and hatred that we condemn and we multiply it. Instead of stamping it out, we increase it and we increase its power.

Those are the two greatest dangers not only this week but really every day in the smallest of ways. Now we're facing it in the biggest of ways. It's hard because there's actually truth in both of those places of being. It's true that there's evil in the world. There's a lot of evil. And it's true that we need to find a way to be safe as a country and as a human race. So do you see the dilemma? And do you see the danger of falling on either side into hopelessness and despair or into hatred and evil? What's the way out?

Our church believes that we as a human race are evolving, that humanity is evolving. And one of the primary ways that we evolve as individuals and as a people is through recognizing evil for what it is and through finding an effective loving response to it. In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus tells us the first step in how to do this: “Love your enemies.”

“Love your enemies.” Now how the heck do you love your enemy? First let’s talk about what it doesn’t mean. Loving your enemy does not mean that you love the evil that was done. Loving your enemy does not mean loving evil; it does not mean condoning evil; it does not mean doing nothing and letting it happen again. Loving your enemy means remembering that we are all part of one humanity.

From a Swedenborgian perspective, evil is very, very real and yet it’s not a primary source. Evil is what we call *a perversion of good*. All life, all love, the essence of everything, is good. And we human beings are able to mess up that goodness; we are able to turn things upside down and make things very bad and very evil. We human beings are given freedom to turn good into bad. Now lots of people ask why didn’t God stop this from happening? Wouldn’t a loving God stop this from happening? Think about that all the way through. If God stopped our evil actions, what would we be? The purpose of life is to learn how to love. The only way to learn how to love is to have choices, some good choices and some bad choices. And folks, those choices are real, and God doesn’t stop us from doing really bad things. God loves us enough to not stop us, to not take away our humanity.

So again, the challenge before us is to respond to this extraordinary crisis by actually taking an evolutionary step forward in our development as humans by to not letting our spirits be killed by this attack, by not letting ourselves become consumed by the anger and hatred which was projected at us, and by finding a way, an action that is motivated by love.

I’ll tell you one way of how I do it. I don’t know the people who did these terrible things. But I know that they were once little babies, innocent little babies; and I’m able to love every little baby. That’s one way I can bring that love. And I know that God doesn’t give up on any of us; no matter how bad an act we commit, God never gives up on any of us. There is always inside of everyone at least a spark of goodness; and we can love that goodness in somebody even when we can’t see it. We can believe and trust that it’s there. And that’s what “love your enemy” means. It means love the good that is within them, even if that is a goodness you cannot see.

There is another thing we must do, and Christopher Bache talked to us about this a few weeks ago. We need to feel our suffering and not be overcome by it. We need to let in the enormity of what has happened, and we need to find the resolve inside of ourselves that we will spend the rest of our lives seeking a way to create peace.

There’s one more thing that we must do and perhaps it’s the hardest one to say right now. In order to stamp out evil, we need to see inside ourselves, as individuals and as a nation, in what ways we contribute to evil. You know the saying, we need to see the plank in our eye as well as the splinter in the other’s eye. There is no justification for what occurred, absolutely none, that’s not what I’m talking about. But for healing to happen, for peace to happen, between any groups of people, we need to each recognize our part, whether big or small. Do you know what I mean by that? This is the trickiest one of all and I don’t want you going out of here confused about that. If you are, come find me and we’ll talk it through some more.

Congregation answered: “You mean beginning to understand our enemy?”

Yes, beginning to understand our enemy. It doesn’t make them right in any way, but peace can’t happen without beginning to understand how the things we say or do or how we act or don’t act contributes to pain and suffering in this world. And then we must find a way to begin to turn that around.

I can’t end on that note. I’m going to end on this note. How many of you have cried tears this week for somebody whom you’ve never met? How many of you are acting a little more warmly and kindly to strangers? How many of you are driving more considerately? How many of you are finding yourselves saying “I love you” to people who you have never said “I love you” to

before? These are all signs of our hearts growing. And our hearts need to continue to grow. We need to keep letting that happen, okay? So as well as loving those people who we have a really hard time loving, let's increase our loving of those who it's not so tough to love too .

Would you reach out to someone next to you and let's say a closing prayer.

Dear God, Help us not to be consumed by hatred and revenge but help us to act wisely in the face of this crisis and help us not to fall into hopelessness but help us to be buoyed up by the spirit of your love. Lord, through your love and your wisdom all things are possible. Help our love for one another to grow and deepen all the days of our lives. Amen.