

On the Third Anniversary of the Tree of Life Synagogue Massacre, Pittsburgh, Pa.
“The Power of Evil”
Romans 12:9-21
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Next Sunday is “Reformation Sunday,” the 504th anniversary of the day Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses (or theological arguments) on the door of the cathedral in Wittenburg, Germany thereby launching the Protestant Reformation. But this Tuesday is ALSO a significant anniversary. It was three years ago on that date that the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh took place- the worst anti-Semitic attack in our nation’s history. It took the shooter—46 year-old Robert Gregory Bowers--just eleven minutes to kill eleven men and women from all three of the congregations that worshiped there, the sole reason being that they were Jewish. At the time, I was serving as an interim minister in Wexford and my organist at the church, Cindy Snyder, was contacted to provide counselors for the victim’s families. This was because when she wasn’t playing the organ on Sunday mornings, she worked as the Clinical Director at the Center For Victims, a non-profit on Pittsburgh’s Southside which counsels victims of trauma.

On the first anniversary of that attack, *60 Minutes* aired a special segment about it. Leslie Stahl, the show’s long-time investigative reporter, returned to the scene of the crime to interview the rabbi and members of that congregation. They remarked how never in their wildest dreams did they imagine such virulent antisemitism would appear on the doorstep of their own SYNAGOGUE, much less in such a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic city like Pittsburgh. Bowers was a supporter of white-nationalism and he chose THAT particular synagogue because of its well-known outreach to migrants and refugees. When Stahl asked some of the victim’s spouses where such hatred came from, most felt the killer wasn’t BORN that way and that the same could probably be said of those who harbor a SIMILAR hatred toward OTHER groups whether Jews or Muslims, Afro-Americans or even gays and lesbians. When she asked whether THEY harbored any hatred for the man who had taken their loved ones from them, surprisingly their reply was the same- that they personally held little or no feelings of hatred or vengeance towards him. Instead, they affirmed what it is their faith teaches them about responding to their enemies, that they are to forgive persons for their terrible actions.

Their response was similar to the forgiveness extended by the parishioners of the Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina to the young man who murdered nine of THEIR own members four years earlier. What made the shootings at the Charleston church PARTICULARLY egregious was that an hour before he pulled out his Glock handgun and began firing indiscriminately at worshipers, the 21 year-old white supremacist had been warmly welcomed into their church and had even joined in a Bible study. In a demonstration of solidarity, members of the Mother Emanuel church journeyed to Pittsburgh to express their OWN sympathy and love for the victims and their families. Similarly, many of the churches, mosques, and synagogues in the area responded by holding prayer meetings and special services as a way of demonstrating THEIR solidarity with their Jewish brothers and sisters.

The question of how evil takes root and metastasizes in a one's soul until it eventually CONSUMES and TAKES OVER that person's life is one I've spent a good deal of time pondering. When Psalm 23 says "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," it seems to suggest that evil has an intimate connection to the "temptations" we all experience. Generally speaking, our temptations can be said to fall into THREE DIFFERENT CATEGORIES: there are temptations to the FLESH, which produce such sins as lust and gluttony; there are temptations to the MIND, which lead us to pride and envy; and then there are temptations for the IDOLATROUS LOVE OF THINGS, which is the source of human greed. Our temptations tend to vary in intensity as we grow from one stage of our life into the next. For instance, while we are young, we find ourselves easily lured into sins of the FLESH. Then in middle age, we are more easily given to sins of the MIND such as pride and the lust for power. Finally, in old age, we exhibit a greater inclination towards AVARICE. Knowing that our lives are nearing an end, we compensate for our lack of ETERNAL security by piling up earthly goods and trying to increase our ECONOMIC security.

I think what concerns me MOST is how our continual surrender to what is unhealthy and even DESTRUCTIVE can subsequently result where we no longer care about such things as personal integrity or human relationships, to where we lose any sense of duty to that which is right and good and true. Eventually, it can lead to the death of one's soul. This is best summed up in a quote I once found by the great 19th century evangelist Dwight L. Moody, "Sow the act, and reap the habit; sow the habit, and reap the character; sow the character, and reap the eternity." This process of moral and spiritual decline came to my attention over forty years ago when, not long after John Paul II had been elected Pope, I happened to pick up a copy of one of his first magazine interviews. I was curious to learn more about this man- who he was, where he came from, and his views on some of the major issues of the day. He said something in that article that has never left me. He was concerned about the young people of the world and the great spiritual hunger he sensed within many of them, and what he basically said was:

I'm not all that worried about the individual sins that so many of us in the church often get exercised about- such as whether they smoke some pot or drink too much or perhaps indulge in a little free love. What concerns me MOST is when the Spirit of God speaks to their hearts and tries to remind them what is good and true and beautiful and right and yet they constantly shut their ears to him. Over the course of a lifetime, we can so continue to deafen ourselves to the voice of truth and love--to the voice of GOD HIMSELF as he tirelessly calls us to himself--that we no longer HEAR him, that the heart becomes crusted over and our conscience no longer has the force it once did. It is then that our soul has become DEAD and matters of right and wrong no longer have any meaning for us. THAT is what worries me MOST!

I often think about his comment on the corruptibility of the human soul. I think about it every time I hear about another mass killing- how the shooter was not born that way but over the course of years and by slow degrees he surrendered bits of his soul, he forfeited parts of his humanity until the capacity to love and empathize with others was COMPLETELY lost. I thought about it when I heard about the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fl. Those who knew the young man--Nikolas Cruz--described him as "lost" and "lonely" and a "violent" soul. His father died when he was young and he drew especially close to his mother which was by all accounts a loving relationship. Although raised a Catholic, the

lessons of his faith never seemed to take root. His behavior in school grew increasingly worse- characterized by foul language, insults, disobedience, and constant disruption. Easily angered, he eventually developed a fascination with guns and death to where he would torture and kill small animals. The police were called to his home twenty-three times over his conduct. When his mother died a few years ago, he was taken in by another family who lived not far from his home, but he continually got into fights, punched holes in the walls, and even attacked the mother. That's when he took out his AK-15, walked over to the school, and began shooting. Minutes later, seventeen students and teachers were dead with another seventeen left severely wounded.

Cruz's story is similar to so many others who over the course of a lifetime gradually became more and more deaf to the entreaties of God until they could no longer hear them and their conscience curdled and died. The heart can become SO calloused, SO jaded as to what it means to be human that it eventually becomes incapable of loving or accepting love. Such persons are unable to register the slightest pity or sympathy for anyone other than themselves, and it usually ends with their OWN destruction and incalculable damage to those around them.

There is a moving scene in Melville's *Moby Dick* where the *Pequod*, Ahab's ship, comes across another ship, the *Rachel*. Only the day before, the *Rachel* had encountered the white whale and, sending the boats out after it, the whale had disappeared into the distance dragging the small boat with the captain's twelve-year old son aboard it. Captain Gardiner now appeals to Ahab's compassion and asks if he will assist in finding the boat with his son onboard. He explains that if the two ships systematically sweep the sea, they may find it or at least the remains of it. "My boy, my own boy is among them. For God's sake- I beg, I conjure...For eight-and-forty hours let me charter your ship- I will gladly pay for it, and roundly pay for it- if there be no other way- for eight-and-forty hours only- only that you must, oh, you must, and you SHALL do this thing."

The desperate sea captain even reminds Ahab that he ALSO has a young son back home in Bedford. He appeals to any vestige of sympathy or tenderness he might have but Ahab will have none of it. Deaf to the captain's pleas, he only wants to know, "Have you seen the white whale!" In other words, he hasn't heard a single word of the frantic captain. In his monomaniacal hunt for the animal that years before had taken his leg, in his single-minded pursuit of vengeance, it seems everything human is now gone and he is no better than an animal HIMSELF. His heart has become so eaten up by bitterness and revenge that nothing else matters- there is no measure of love or sympathy left to appeal to. Incapable of hearing the other man's plea, Ahab will stalk and kill that whale even if it leads to his own death and ultimately the destruction of his men WITH him- which it in fact DOES.

Judas Iscariot was ALSO such a man. Throughout our Lord's ministry, he was unable to respond to the continuous offers of love and grace patiently extended by Jesus time and time again. His was the sad story of a man so given over to avarice and greed that it eventually destroyed him. He'd been provided many opportunities to turn from his ways. Jesus showed him the same degree of love and grace and forgiveness that he offered to his other disciples- but Judas rejected them all. Over time, his heart became increasingly hardened until his conscience could no longer respond to the voice of the Spirit even when it came from the Son of God

HIMSELF. Honesty, integrity, and truth no longer held any meaning for him as any distinction between right and wrong was gone, and he was now incapable of experiencing love or sympathy or pity for anyone except himself.

My friends, the lesson to be found in the stories of Robert Bowers, Nikolas Cruz, Ahab, and Judas Iscariot essentially concern the death of the soul. These men were not BORN monsters. They grew up in homes just like our OWN- experiencing the same love and joy, laughter and tears. But pride and ambition, jealousy and hatred, avarice and greed took seed in their hearts, gnawing away at it until there was no heart left, until nothing remained for God to speak to. And THAT becomes the WORST fate, the most HORRIBLE judgment one can suffer--to no longer be able to hear the voice of God, to no longer own a conscience, when all those qualities which make one human--faith, love, compassion, trust--have atrophied and died.

I remember watching a television interview back in the late 70's with Bishop Festo Kivengere, the Anglican bishop of Uganda who had been a personal witness to the brutality and horrors that took place in that country under the bloody tyrant Idi Amin. He had just written a book entitled *I Love Idi Amin* and when asked by the interviewer how someone who was responsible for the torture and deaths of hundreds of thousands of his own people including the torture of the bishop HIMSELF, his answer was, "I have no hatred for Idi Amin, nothing but compassion and love. You see, people say that one day he will be judged by God but I say that he has ALREADY been judged. That man's conscience is now dead and he can no longer hear the voice of God's Spirit calling out to him, imploring him to cease his evil deeds and instead embrace the way of mercy, justice, and love, the way of Jesus Christ himself. When one can no longer hear that voice—the voice of GOD speaking to his heart and spirit--he already IS judged and becomes a person to be most pitied. It is the WORST judgment anyone can ever suffer."

Believe me when I tell you that if it could happen to such individuals as these, it could very well happen to any of US, MYSELF included! THIS is why we must stay close to Christ and why we have to pray EVERY DAY "Lord, lead us not into temptation but DELIVER us from evil!" because we are ALL susceptible to evil's influence! The Apostle Paul understood the human heart better than most and in this morning's lesson he exhorted the Christians at the church in Rome to let their love be genuine and to HATE that which is evil. "Instead," he tells them, "hold onto and cherish that which is good," a word of instruction SO important that he has to repeat it AGAIN, "Do NOT be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with GOOD!"

I know I sound like a Baptist here but the truth is that the biographies of these men serve as a WARNING to us this morning. Years of pride and jealousy and petty thievery had built such a thick crust around their heart that it eventually smothered their CONSCIENCE as well. The GOOD NEWS, however, is that God is STRONGER than Satan and his love is GREATER than any evil. Christ's power can sustain us through ANY temptation! He promises to deliver us from the destructive grip of each temptation for the risen, living Lord stands with us in the midst of every testing. Through his Word and by his Spirit, we are constantly reminded that in spite of our OWN treachery, regardless of the selfishness and pride, the lust and the ambitions, the jealousies and the hatreds that we secretly harbor, his love and forgiveness can break through them all. He can prevent them from taking root in our lives and ultimately devouring us. He gives us the power to humbly confess our sin and express new dependence upon him. He shows

us that though we may often be faithless towards HIM, he will always keep faith with US. But we need to act decisively, we need to repent quickly, we need to remain close to Christ lest we TOO "sow the act, and reap the habit; sow the habit, and reap the character; sow the character, and reap the eternity." Amen and amen.