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The Shadow Knows

Anyone want to name all five Unitarian presidents on this Presidents Day weekend? Can anyone do it? We have one Millard Fillmore, that is absolutely correct. He is well known for having the first running bathtub in the White House. (We are very proud of him.) Jefferson is correct. I hear John Adams. I hear John Quincy Adams, who was a member of this church. One more. Taft is correct; William Howard Taft. I know it's a little imposing and awe inspiring, but it's true. Not only was he the President of the United States, Chief Justice of the United States, but President of the American Unitarian Association.

Now, we're going to do a little theology this morning. This is actually real life theology that I'm talking about today. It's a subset of the theological enterprise; it's called theodicy. Basically it's an explanation of why you can have an all-powerful loving God, and the world that is self evidently full of evil. How do you reconcile these two realities? Neither one, you can deny. This world is full of heartache; it is sore and bleeding and each one of us carries our wounds. On the other hand, men and women across millennia, across all creeds and religions have evoked a divinity, which invites us and calls us to a loving, compassionate order of which we may be a part. Of which we may be blessed. How do you put these two things together?

The great theologians have tried, and in my humble opinion, have failed. And I won't do it in twenty minutes, I assure you. And there will be a little pivot here in a few minutes where we turn. Where I think it takes us into much more useful territory. But let's stay with pastoral piece of this. I remember, one of my very best friends, a Congregational minister, staying overnight with us. He was taking a course in theology, and we were talking about this tough question, about how you "reconcile evil with a loving God". And I said to him, "You know David, I believe that my vision of God is so wide and so expansive, that basically I think it includes suffering. It includes the capriciousness of everyday life." He got very angry with me. I've never seen him so angry. He said, "Stephen, I could no more believe that. In my faith, I believe that God is solely loving and evil is the exclusion of God." I realized that here we were, in the late evening, having a glass of wine, and suddenly we had stumbled with an edge of anger into one of the classic religious conundrums.

In trying to define theodicy there have been three classic ways of getting at this question. First of all, that suffering and evil are allowed and even encouraged by God as punishment for your sins. Well, we've all heard this along the way in some way or another. The old vision of, "For whom the Lord loves he chastises."

The other is that suffering and evil are brought to us as a means of education. It's a way that your soul grows. The more suffering heaped upon you, the deeper and wiser a person you might become. How many people have heard this classic theological cliché? "God never sends us more suffering than our shoulders can bear." Yeah, you've heard it, haven't you? I don't actually believe it's true.

The other is a broader, more expansive sense of a grand design. That God has created this universe of ours, this cosmos, out of which men and women confront their spiritual destinies. All the evil that you encounter and what you suffer is part of a design that is mysterious, and you can never know and never figure out. But it's basically good for you.

Some people, and I'm one of them, believe that it is very difficult to reconcile the vision of an all powerful, all loving God and much of what we live with in this world. In fact, the poet Archibald McLeish, wrote in his rumination over the Book of Job, "That if God is God, he is not good. And if God is good, then he's not God." There's a true conundrum here. If God is all-powerful and if God controls your destiny, how do you explain the evil that we are surrounded by, and touched by and smeared by? It's tough. Even the Bible itself directs us into precisely this conundrum. In Deuteronomy it says, "God says, 'I kill and I make alive. I wound and I heal. There is none that can deliver you out of my hand.'" It is a bracing, daunting vision of this all-powerful God, but not too loving and not too cozy. In the Fall, the old vision of Adam and Eve, why were they expelled from the garden? Well, for a very simple reason. They wished to know all that God knew. They wished to become Gods. As the Bible says, "To know good and evil. To be able to discern and distinguish between the two." That's why we got kicked out.

Isaiah says, "I am Yahweh and there is none above. I formed the light and I create the darkness." We all know what that darkness can mean in our daily life. But it's not just in the Jewish and Christian traditions! Even in China, in the third centuries, Zazu said, "The nature of man is evil. It is only his goodness that can be acquired." Directly in contradiction, Confucius said, "The tendency of our nature is good. There are none but have this tendency to be good." So the conundrum cuts across all religions and all time.

Theodicy for me is a rather elegant, philosophical, kind of abstract way of getting God off the hook. What it really means is somehow an escape from the world in which we live. For me at last, theodicy is a fools' game. This conundrum cannot be solved. It will not be solved. But it does take us into some interesting and powerful places. Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz, writes about a prisoner asking, "'Where is God? Where is God?' Though the adults died quickly, there was a child, being lighter in weight, dangled for a half hour struggling between life and death. And the agonizing question was repeated, 'Where's God now?' Elie Wiesel heard a voice behind him answer, 'Where's God? There he is! He's hanging there, a child on the gallows.'" This world is tough. This world is full of challenges that beggar our imagination and more importantly, even at times our empathy. What do we do about the hungry? What do we do about senseless violence? What do we do about a world in which a young 14 year-old girl writes in her diary, "Despite everything, I really believe in my heart that people are good." These are the words of Anne Frank.

The turn in the pivot of the sermon is right now. Some years ago I read these words from Gandhi, I don't have them precisely. But they so struck me that I want to share them with you today. He said that, "The road to wisdom is an understanding that the world does not, despite all that we think we know, does not have sharp divisions between good and evil, friend and enemy, believer and heretic." He added words that I hope you take home with you today, "The real dividing line between good and evil, actually, runs down the middle of the individual heart." That's where theodicy becomes interesting, because I can't describe or solve the conundrum of

whether God allows evil or encompasses evil. But I can deal with what I have done, recognize that dividing line in my own heart, and I must. Because there's really no other reason to seek a spiritual life at all unless we can confront that dividing line between good and evil inside every single person.

When we think that evil is just outside of ourselves, that harkens back on the sermon I did about two weeks ago on perfectionism. The most dangerous people in the world are people who are not acquainted with their shadow. They're not away from that dividing line which cuts right through them. They project out whatever it is that is haunting them, and hurting them, and provoking them. They just project out onto others. We have all known people like this, and occasionally have been people like this. It's one of the classic deals you have to confront if you are ever to go deep. If you are ever to be completely honest with yourself, is to deal with this terrible seduction of projecting out what it is that is so hard to deal with inside ourselves. But you have to confront it. Because if you just project it out, it has free play inside you to do the most enormous harm and to hurt others and to reduce yourself from the person you might have been. To recognize and to move deep, this is our purpose. This is our struggle. This is in fact an invitation. I'm sure some of you are thinking right now, "Holy cow. I am so bummed. I can't believe I came out on a President's Day Weekend to deal with this." I don't blame you. It's hard to preach it. But if we're being completely honest, if we're actually going to do theology, if we're actually going to do any good at all, then we have to do this work. And it is work. It takes enormous quantities of forgiveness, connection with others, confrontation of great thoughts that have come before us, silence, prayer, meditation, and I believe community. Without community I don't know whether you can do this work. I really don't. Carl Jung said, "There is inside everyone this shadow. Our true purpose is to deal with it, to confront it, to find it, to acknowledge it, and to deal with it. But to deal with it in the most compassionate and powerful way possible."

Many of you remember the old radio show that my parents listened to. "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows." The shadow knows a lot. The shadow knows a lot about you. And when you ignore the shadow, when we think that we are creatures of light that do not cast a shadow, then we are not honest and we are not whole. We contain our shadows if we are to be people of integrity. If we are to heal, if we are to be whole, we have to deal with the shadow side of ourselves. It is inescapable. So we might as well get on with it.

We can debate until the end of time whether God allows evil or contains evil. We will never solve that problem. But now you can ask yourself the infinitely more interesting and provocative, and in the end liberating question, "How do I confront the shadow inside myself?" Because it is there, it is there. "How do I deal with that? I do I engage with it? How do I deal with the larger structures of society that can thwart and twist and even threaten the unfolding of who it is I'm supposed to be?" This is where it gets practical and where it gets pastoral. This other stuff is just twiddling with philosophy, but this is real. Dealing with our obsessions: dealing with our addictions: dealing with our blind spots: dealing with our moments of narcissism we forget that we are for a larger purpose to bind with others, to link up, to heal and to grow. It's not to see the world as merely a mirror of our own ego. I've thought a lot about what evil means to me through the years. I've come to some tentative conclusions. Part of it is of course is to separate out what we would normally call acts of God. Something of life is just

capricious. It cannot be explained. God didn't make it happen. If you get a diagnosis of cancer it isn't because God's trying to educate you or punish you. It happens. It might be environmental. It might be genetic. It is the luck of the draw. Guess what: we all live, we all die. Jesus said, "The rain falls on the just and unjust alike." That's just the truth of it. So separate that out, and then you can begin to deal with what you can deal with. What are your temptations? What are your cravings, your appetites? And then ask yourself, what are the benefits that I draw out of pulling away from others or working towards the enhancement of others?

These are tough questions. They aren't easy questions. It is going deep, as deep as you can go. It isn't always just our sense of knowledge, rational understanding. I have very clear, rational understanding of why I eat too much, but it hasn't necessarily helped my diet yet. There are transcendent leaps we have to make that are above knowledge, even self-knowledge. In the end we have to move away, even from self-knowledge to self-realization. Then from self-realization to something higher, which I would call divine integration. Now that's a big word and sounds a little abstract. All I mean by it is, integration of, "How is my life purpose intertwined with yours? How may I find in friendship and in family life and in connection my truest self? How can I be intertwined and linked up and connected with?" This is for me where the sermon does in fact circle back into theodicy, because I believe this is the highest good. This is the highest God. This is how I would realize or become attuned with God. This is where the word atonement comes from; to turn, to be in tune with. To find a larger harmony in your life decisions, your life choices, your life energy. To make a soul, you simply have to confront your shadows. That's just the way it is. And what is evil? Evil for me is a deep, pervasive, stubborn, lack or absence of empathetic imagination about what the people around you are feeling or experiencing. It is surrendering and succumbing to the seductions of pride and fear in equal measure that keep us from honestly feeling compassion for others' situation. That for me is about as simple a definition of evil as I can come up with. Theodicy, well, sounds like its getting God off the hook, but I don't want to let myself be let off the hook. I want to be responsible for my life and I suspect that is why you're here this morning as well. To see yourself as truly, and as honestly, and as compassionately, forgivingly as you can, to go deep, to the greater mystery of finding goodness in our hearts. The shadow knows.

Amen.