

Challenging Our Faith: Are Human Beings Good or Evil?

Preached by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Third Sunday of Advent, December 15, 2024

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: What Really Matters to Your Heart (Maggie Wheeler); #1007 There's a River Flowing in My Soul; #108 How Can I Keep from Singing (added verse 4).

Piano solos: Mizu no naka no (Inside of Water) by Ryuichi Sakamoto, theme from *Atonement* by Dario Marianelli, Variations on a Theme by Corelli (excerpt) by Sergey Rachmaninoff.

Reading 1: from Alexandr Solzhenitsyn

The topic of the service today is human good and human evil. First, we have a short reading by the late Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, who lived from 1918 to 2008. He won the Templeton Prize as well as the Nobel Prize for Literature. Most of his work exposed the cruelty of his country's totalitarian regime. During the Second World War, Solzhenitsyn served as a captain in the Soviet army, and in a private letter he wrote a criticism of the dictator Joseph Stalin. This was found out, and for this he was arrested and sentenced to a forced labor prison camp for 8 years.

In the 1970s, he published three volumes about the regime's widespread system of prison camps, which lasted from 1918 to 1956. He included his own experiences and those of prisoners he had known. After publishing the first two volumes of what he entitled *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn was arrested again and exiled from his country. In other words, he knew something about human evil. Next Irina will read one of his well-quoted passages in the original Russian, and then we will hear it in English translation.

Irina reads in Russian. Then Anthony reads the words of Solzhenitsyn in English:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to *separate them* from the rest of us, and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

Reading 2: "Help" by Gordon Houser, Nov. 7, 2024.

This is a reading from the *Christian Century* magazine. It's an essay submitted by a reader named Gordon Houser, from North Newton, Kansas. He submitted this in response to the prompt of *help*.ⁱ

Less than an hour from home, after about ten hours on the road, my daughter, Abri, and I noticed the low fuel light come on. The car's computer said we had 12 miles left before our gas would run out completely. Three miles later, we pulled into a small town with one gas station. It was 11:30 p.m., and the station was closed.

Abri was driving, having offered to travel with my wife, Jeanne, and me from Abri's home in Indianapolis. Jeanne had been released from the hospital earlier that day and wasn't cleared to drive. Abri and I took turns driving, keeping track of hospital signs along the way just in case.

We'd had made good time, and our new car, a hybrid, was getting 44 miles to the gallon. We'd passed several gas stations earlier, but I neglected to check the gauge, assuming we'd have enough to get home. Now we were stuck here, and home was about 50 miles away. I called the local sheriff's office and was told what we'd already learned from Google: no stations open nearby, and the one where we were parked would not open until 5 a.m. An undersheriff drove out, only to tell us he couldn't help us.

Meanwhile, a car had pulled into the station and parked near the closed Subway shop nearby. A young man got out, and I went to talk to him, explaining our situation. Crazy, I know. Did I think he'd be carrying gas with him? He said he and his friend had stopped for a smoke break.

Later the two twentysomethings walked over to talk with us. One looked at the other and said, "We could drive back to Emporia and get some gas for you."

Emporia was 20 miles away, the opposite direction from where they were heading. "Really?" I asked.

"Sure."

We learned they were on their way to Hutchinson, about 90 miles away. They worked for a crew that put up pole barns and were driving their boss's car. He didn't allow them to smoke in the car, so they had stopped to smoke. Our good fortune.

I had no cash and borrowed \$30 from Abri and gave it to them, along with thanks. They took off.

Forty minutes later, they were back with a two-gallon container of gas, more than enough to get us home. I put the gas in our car and gave them the can. Jeanne gave them another \$15 for their expenses.

She said to one of them, "I'm not sure I would do this for someone."

He said gently, "You can change."

They said goodbye and took off. By now it was 1:30 a.m., and they would have to wake up five hours later to go to work. We headed home, having just met Jesus on his smoke break.

Sermon

Are human beings good or evil? This sermon topic is Reverend Lucy's fault. A few months ago, in a sermon about our tradition, she said it is wrong to describe Unitarian Universalism as a religion where "you can believe whatever you want." You can't, she said. To be sure, we don't have a creed, and there is a diversity of beliefs among us, but we do promote certain ethical and spiritual values, and we reject some other values. Then she said, "You can't believe just anything. For example, you can't say that people are evil!" Not long after this, I confessed to her that I do wonder, sometimes, if we are basically, inherently evil. There's plenty of evidence for this, so I struggle with that question. Does this make me a heretic?

Lucy said, "That sounds like a sermon topic."

So, happy holidays! Here's a refresher, or an intro if you're new to us. UU congregations affirm the dignity and worth of every person. We say human worth is "inherent." Two centuries ago, our Unitarian ancestors argued that the lesson of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth is that everyone has the potential to make helpful choices instead of destructive ones. We can grow in goodness. We can follow the spirit's call toward kindness, mercy, generosity, and social justice. At the same time, our Universalist ancestors preached that everybody is part of one human family with one divine source, and that source is Love. Yes, we are one big human family, but it's rarely been a happy family.

And as members of this family, we must acknowledge how much evidence there is of persistent human evil. Since the toppling of Syria's dictator a week ago, hundreds of thousands

of political prisoners have been freed from the most vile forms of captivity. We are learning details about their dungeons. On the radio on Saturday I heard an interview with a father and son.ⁱⁱ A Syrian man had been kidnapped in Lebanon when his baby was 10 months old. He's free now, after 31 years, and back with his adult son. It was an amazing reunion. Of course, thousands more people disappeared, and they will never come back to their families. For 54 years, the Assad family—father and son—suppressed freedom and dissent. They brutalized innocent people.

Yet they did not do this alone. They needed leaders to carry it out, and secret police, prison guards, and bureaucratic officials, as any regime does. Surely some people obeyed orders out of terror for their own lives and their own families. Yet others no doubt enjoyed the chance to hold power over other people. They took pleasure in being cruel. Is that evidence of our inherent human evil?

In 1971, a professor at Stanford University conducted an experiment to see how good people can be coaxed into doing terrible things. Philip Zimbardo recruited 75 undergraduate male students to participate in a prison simulation, some to act as guards and others as prisoners. It was 1971, and none of the young men wanted to play the role of a prison guard, so they had to use a coin toss to assign the roles. Then Zimbardo enlisted the Palo Alto police to arrest the designated prisoners at their homes and put them in handcuffs. At the police station, the pretend guards blindfolded the pretend prisoners and then took them to basement of the psychology building. They stripped them naked, gave them jail uniforms, and locked them up, three per cell.

After only one day, the guards began to relish having power over the inmates, insulting them, blowing whistles at them, bossing them around. The prisoners ridiculed the guards, which led to further punishment in order to demonstrate who had the power. As the pretend prison superintendent, even Zimbardo got into managing all of it. Upset by this, his girlfriend and graduate student assistant told him that she didn't know what kind of man he was anymore and broke up with him. Some traumatized students began having breakdowns, so he ended the simulation in six days rather than two weeks.

In a later book about this, Zimbardo concluded that *who we are* is affected by the roles we play and the groups we participate in. Who we are, who we become, is shaped by the degrees of power we have or feel we have. In other words, good people can be coaxed into evil actions. This conclusion is understandable to me, but we still must question his way of exploring that question. Fortunately, these days, strict regulations about human-subject research would prohibit such an experiment. Moreover, today's regulations also prohibit professors from dating their student assistants.ⁱⁱⁱ

The upsetting results of this perverse experiment do not disprove or discredit our UU principle of the dignity and worth of every person. They only demonstrate how important it is to *defend* our principles, how much we need to promote human worth and protect human dignity, even when it's costly or painful to do so.

Human evil can arise not merely from those who do monstrous and evil things, but also from those who fail to confront systemic harm and allow harm to continue. Indifference is its own kind of evil. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote his Letter from Birmingham Jail in 1963. He had come to Alabama to lead a voting rights action when he was arrested.

Dr. King wrote in his open letter that he was “gravely disappointed in the white moderate,” meaning each of his white Christian and Jewish clergy colleagues. Dr. King wrote: “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

I have concluded that human beings are not inherently evil, but we do have that capacity. We are complex, contradictory, imperfect, vulnerable, and powerful. If all of us have the capacity to commit evil, then we must guard against it.

Deciding that particular people must be intrinsically evil and that others are good is the beginning of a deadly decline into deciding *who* is evil. And that is when evil begins.

That is, the most massive persecutions in history have been perpetrated in the cause of *rooting out* evil. Consider the many examples of religious wars, crusades, the torture of heretics, violent national revolutions, the imprisonment and execution of dissidents, and persecutions of people perceived as different from the norm. By going after people accused of being evil, whole societies have committed evil and called it good.

After bearing witness to the Soviet regime’s brutality against him and other political prisoners, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn declared that it would be so easy if we could sort out the evil people and put them away, destroy them. But it’s not possible. As he wrote: “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” The good side and the bad side—inside us, they have always been side by side.

The Unitarian understanding of a fully human Jesus of Nazareth is that he showed that we can choose to help instead of hurt, choose to share instead of steal, and choose to show mercy instead of indifference. No matter what happens to us, we have a choice. We can change.

In one reading this morning, Gordon Houser and his daughter were driving his wife home to Kansas from a hospital in Indiana when they ran out of gas at midnight. As they sat at a gas station that wouldn’t open till 5:00 am, two young men offered to go out of their way to fill up a gas can for them. Houser’s family are lifelong residents of a small town in Kansas and Mennonite Christians. When the helpers came back, Houser’s wife, Jeanne, paid one of them and extra \$15 and said, “I’m not sure I would do this for someone.” The young man said gently, “You can change.”

Jesus of Nazareth caused controversy by sharing meals with people of a different faith or social class, women in prostitution and others on the margins of society, and especially Roman tax collectors and soldiers of the empire. Even though tax collectors and soldiers participated in the injustice of the ruling regime, Jesus did not block them from a relationship with him. Who knows what he told them? Maybe Jesus leaned over and said: *What you have done is not all of who you are. You are loved. You can change.*

Human beings are vulnerable to hurt and injury from one another. We are fragile. We are all flawed and imperfect. We are capable of resentment, self-righteousness, and hostility. And we are capable of so much more, so much better.

Recently I began reading a book entitled *Good People: Stories from the Best of Humanity*.^{iv} It’s a collection of 101 essays by people recounting times when other people chose to help them out, show them kindness or patience, or demonstrate generosity with no expectations for something in return. The book is filled with stories in which people act on a

sense of our shared humanity. Customers in checkout lines pay the charges for a person ahead of them who doesn't have enough money. Café owners and shopkeepers give away a free meal or an item off the shelf to a person in need.

Strangers witness a solo parent struggling to respond to their children's distress or other needs in a park or a parking lot. Instead of scowling in judgment, they gently draw near and say something like this: "Excuse me. Your family is so beautiful. You're doing a great job." When a parent is not sure they have the patience or energy to keep going, extra support can make the difference, even if it's just a friendly stranger pointing out that their dedication is obvious and admirable.

Good People is published by Upworthy, a web-based company dedicated to finding stories that reflect the best in humanity, with the hope of inspiring all of us to go the extra mile for others. Essays from several countries talk about teachers whose help and acceptance inspired students for the rest of their lives, neighbors and classmates who showed empathy and support, and perfect strangers who went out of their way to give assistance or show kindness to another.

The slogan "Pay it Forward" means that people decide that we are going to be generous and helpful because we recognize the times when others helped us out. *Pay it forward* means we keep the good things going. A man recalls when he was 19 and in Army basic training. Waiting alone and hungry in a large airport after midnight, he asked a man working as a janitor where the vending machines were. There were none. The janitor came back with his own lunchbox and insisted on sharing it with the younger man. Looking back on this now, at age 46, the man writes: "Over the years I've made it a habit to keep an eye out for lonely diners sitting in silence or folks who are clearly bearing the weight of the world on their shoulders.... My big takeaway [was that] a small act of kindness can lift someone's spirits in unimaginable ways. I'll continue to pass it along at every chance I get."

I could have saved money by visiting the Upworthy website to read some good stories for free, but I decided to buy the book when I heard its editors on a public radio program last month.^v During the show, listeners emailed and called in to tell their own stories of moments of kindness received. One woman recounted the sad event of having to euthanize their family's dog. The cremated remains were shipped to their home by FedEx or UPS. Instead of leaving the box on the porch as usual, the delivery agent rang their doorbell to hand it to them. He knew what it contained, so just leaving it didn't feel right, he said. He told them that on all prior deliveries he was accustomed to hearing their dog announcing his approach, and he would remember it. The family appreciated this human touch.

It is possible to be worn down by the many examples of human indifference, hostility, and cruelty. If, like me, you find yourself wanting to write off human beings as basically evil, Upworthy's website and book are filled with evidence to the contrary. Here's another story.

A married couple in California with two children was overwhelmed by the death of the wife's father. They both needed to take off extra time from their jobs, as they were stressed by many tasks as well as taking care of their children. The bills were piling up, however, and the rent was coming due for the home they'd occupied for seven years. One night they received a text from their landlord. First he extended condolences for the loss of her father. Then he said: "I want to thank you and your family for being great all these years. You have worked hard, and I'd like to show my appreciation and waive the month of November. I hope this helps with some

Christmas shopping or whatever else it can help out with. So please, no need to send me November's rent. We'll pick it back up in December. God bless."

To be sure, a heartwarming story won't change an inaccessible and expensive rental housing market. Nor will a random act of kindness reform a social system filled with inequities. Hence, we dare not let ourselves be distracted from the larger needs around us.

At the same time, a single story of generosity can open our heart. It can remind us of our shared humanity. As we bear witness to the needs for change that we long to see in our communities and our country, we can keep our hearts open for the actions and words which keep us connected with others. Let us appreciate the acts of generosity, kindness and mercy which fill our world. Human goodness is always near at hand.

In the days to come, if you pause to think about it, I hope you can remember a gesture of generosity, encouragement or practical help that another human being made on your behalf. And perhaps you can think of a time when you showed kindness or mercy to another person, even though you had nothing to gain from it.

Yet when we choose to be kind, we *do* gain something. When we choose to go the extra mile for others, we gain hope in human goodness. We deepen our sense of connection and belonging to the whole human family.

So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

ⁱ "Essays by Readers: Help," *The Christian Century*, Nov. 7, 2024. Accessed at <https://www.christiancentury.org/readers-write/essays-readers-help>

ⁱⁱ Weekend Edition Saturday, National Public Radio, Dec. 14, 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ "How Monsters Are Made," Hidden Brain podcast, Dec. 2, 2024. <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/how-monsters-are-made/>

^{iv} Gabriel Reilich and Lucia Knell, *Good People: Stories of the Best of Humanity* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Partners, 2004). All quotations and paraphrases are from this edition.

^v Forum, KQED-FM Radio, San Francisco, August 30, 2024 (rebroadcast in November). <https://www.kqed.org/forum-podcasts>