

First and Center
Pastor's Blog
July 1, 2019

(This one is a bit longer so hang in there.)

“So, five years of bombing, a diet of bark, bugs, lizards, and leaves up in the Cambodian jungles, an education in Paris environs in a strict Maoist doctrine with a touch of Rousseau, and other things that we will probably never know about in our lifetime. Including perhaps an invisible cloud of evil that circles the Earth and lands at random in places like Iran, Beirut, Germany, Cambodia, America, set the Khmer Rouge out to commit the worst auto-homeo genocide in modern history.” Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia*.

The late actor and monologist, Spalding Gray, is responsible for bringing the word “evil” back into my vocabulary. Before I saw his film *Swimming to Cambodia*, about his experiences as an actor in the film *The Killing Fields*, which tells a story of the Cambodian genocide in the 1970s, I thought evil was one of those old-fashioned words that people in Bible Times used. Like “the Devil,” or the idea of a geographical “Hell” with fires and pitchforks, I thought it reflected a time and a theology that I simply could no longer embrace.

To say I was naïve is a severe understatement.

After Gray gave me a context for the use of the word “evil,” I began to see it everywhere. The Baptismal service in the UCC Book of Worship includes this question to parents or adult baptisands: “Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and **evil**, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?” When I sit with parents or adults who wish to be baptized these days, we almost always have a significant conversation about what this promise means. The use of the word evil does not give anyone pause these days. Actually, before 9/11 sometimes folk would question what this meant, but I began to notice after that there were fewer questions. Today? I've not had anyone suggest it as an inappropriate word.

Which doesn't mean we understand it fully, or understand what it means to “resist oppression and evil.” I like Gray's description of an “invisible cloud”

**DO NOT BE
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ROMANS 12:21

circling the earth, because otherwise I can make no sense of why extreme cruelty, genocide, torture, or any other number of evils seems to pop up in specific places in greater numbers than other places in very specific times. How did the sophisticated, creative, educated German nation become the center of Holocaust? How did two peoples who had lived side-by-side for millennia in Rwanda suddenly commit mass murder?

And, how is it that my own country - also sophisticated, creative, generous - has become a place where people now openly parade their White Supremacy, set fire to black churches, deny civil rights to the LGBTQ community, perpetrate mass shootings or arson in synagogues and mosques, separate children from their families and put them in cages at the border? And some of this with the encouragement and support of our President and other leaders in government and the media. How can anyone be an effective resister against this?

I would like to blame this surge of what I can only call "evil" on some invisible cloud that has settled here, some virus that has infected some people, turning them into hate zombies. I would like to do that because then my sense of helplessness can be justified. Who can fight an invisible cloud of evil or a zombie apocalypse? Can all those Marvel Superheroes come to life and take care of this problem, please, because people like me, with no visible superpowers, are literally power-less to resist and defeat this evil?

I do not have any easy answers to this. The word of the year is *resist*. Every one of us has the ability to resist in some way. Even if it is only dedicating oneself to going out of your way to be kind. Even if it is only writing emails to politicians. Even if it is only praying. Well, not "only" praying. So that they do not infect us. On July 12, at many places in the country (right now including Glastonbury, Hamden, and other places in Connecticut) people are planning to gather together in the evening to speak as loudly as possible about what is going on at the border. That these camps are evil, and that the people running them seem to be under that cloud, and apparently are accountable to no one, except God. Which they seem to have forgotten if they ever knew it. Maybe marching doesn't change anything. Maybe it does. At the very least it gives us the encouragement of knowing there are other people out there not infected by this zombification of this nation.

Please. Do something. *Resist*.

~ The Rev. Shelly Stackhouse,
Transitional Minister