

The Line Between Good and Evil

Romans 5:1-11

The Third Sunday of Lent, (March 12) 2023

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When I was a boy, I had toy soldiers I played with on rainy or cold days. Some were old and worn and dirty from being out in the yard while others were newer. My newer, nicer ones were always the good guys and the old, worn ones were the bad guys. One day my mother walked into the bedroom where I was playing with them in the floor. I explained to her who was fighting who. She glanced down and said, “Kyle, they all look the same. Who knows who is good and who is bad?”

These days it seems that many folks are a little too sure about who’s good and who’s bad. They know who’s in and who’s out, who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. Of course, who’s bad is always someone else; never us.

My interest today is in asking how we Christians see ourselves and how we deceive ourselves. We live in a world full of fear with politicians stoking the fear and using it to polarize the world into “us” versus “them” with “them” always being evil. These are political questions. But they are much more than that. Questions about how we stand before God, and how we stand with one another, and most especially stand with the so-called “them” – these are Lenten questions. These are questions at the heart of what it means to be followers of Jesus.

Baptist theologian and friend of this church, James McClendon, began his great work *Ethics* with the assertion that being a Christian and doing Christian theology begins with struggle. It is the struggle that comes from knowing that the line between good and evil, between church and world, between the ways of God and the way of fallen humanity is a line which passes right through each Christian heart. McClendon urges humility. We are sinners. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 3, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” “All” means everyone of us; here in the United States as well across the oceans, and it means everyone of us sitting here this morning. All.

I just finished reading an article about Texas Confederate Colonel Clayton Crawford Gillespie, who before the war was a Methodist minister, much respected and beloved, who cared, preached, and worked for the betterment of his neighbors, including the creation of a girl’s school. During the war, after his own capture and short-term imprisonment, he was released by the Union Army, came back to Texas where he became the Confederate commandant of the prisoner of war Camp Groce, located down near Hempstead. By all accounts, he became one of the cruelest and hate-filled commanders of all prisoner of war camps during the Civil War with his prisoners characterized as “living skeletons” and the camp with extraordinarily high mortality rates. After the war he spewed his hatred by way of journalism, advocating for the Lost Cause, hatred of black people, and joined the Klan. Somehow or another after 1870 he changed again. He became once more a gentle and loving Methodist minister, joined the Republican Party in Texas advocating for the rights of former slaves (Raymond Mitchell, “Our Weakness to Forgive,” *East Texas Historical Journal*, Spring-Fall 2022, pp. 20-47).

What caused such changes? How can one person be a good and loving minister, then a hate-filled violent POW camp commandant, and eventually, again a gentle and loving minister? PTSD? A combination of personal trauma, hate-filled propaganda, and disinformation? Theology? What?

The line goes down the middle of each heart.

I read a book review of a book called *In the Land of Magic Soldiers* about war in sub-Saharan Africa. The most haunting figure mentioned in the review was a white South African mercenary who flies the only helicopter in the Sierra Leone military. This white mercenary is paying for the schooling for local children out of his own pocket and is starting a local burn center because there isn't one anywhere in Sierra Leone. At the same time, this white mercenary talked about the thrill that comes with gunning people down from the air with machine guns. "It is better than sex ... There's a lot of adrenaline going. You're all keyed up, and when you realize you're on target, that you've taken out the enemy, that's a great feeling."

The line goes down the middle of each heart.

Theologian Miroslav Volf is Croatian was born and raised in the former Yugoslavia, into a diverse and somewhat cosmopolitan setting with Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims living in proximity to one another for generations. Often living next door to one another. But after Communist Yugoslavia fell in the early 1990's, things came apart.

Volf writes, “Nobody seemed to be in control. ... There seemed to be an insatiable appetite for brutality among ordinary people. Once the war started and the right conditions were maintained, an uncontrollable chain of reactions was underway. These were mostly decent people, as decent as most of us tend to be. Many did not, strictly speaking, *choose* to plunder and burn, rape and torture, or secretly enjoy these. A dormant beast in them was awakened from its uneasy slumber. And not only in them. The motives of those who set to fight against the brutal aggressors were self-defense and justice. The beast in others, however, enraged the beast in them. The moral barriers holding it in check broke down and it went after revenge. In resisting evil, they were trapped by evil (*Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 82).

The lines between good and evil are here, there, and everywhere.

Vaclav Havel, the late president of the Czech Republic, wrote that during the rule of Communism in Czechoslovakia, there were so many everyday acts of compromise on the part of so many people that it became impossible to tell who a collaborator was and who was not. He wrote, “The line [between good and evil] did not run clearly between ‘them’ and ‘us,’ but through each person. No one was simply a victim; everyone was in some measure co-responsible. ... Many people were on both sides” (*NY Review of Books*, Feb. 19, 1998).

Alexander Solzhenitsyn said essentially the same thing in *The Gulag Archipelago*: “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and

evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart. ... This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed with evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts there remains ... an uprooted small corner of evil” (part iv, chapter I).

The season of Lent reminds the Christian community that the line between good and evil runs through you and it runs through me. It reminds us to beware of drawing lines between ourselves on the good side and others on the bad side. A couple of weeks ago on Ash Wednesday, we were reminded of the truth about ourselves. In the words of Psalm 51, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”

The lines run in each of our hearts, and it runs in our congregation and in this town and beyond. The line is not necessarily straight, or always clear, but it is a line, nevertheless and it results in broken hearts, broken marriages, broken congregations, broken families, broken communities, and broken lives.

In Shakespeare’s play, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, two young noblemen are discussing the mixed motives of the characters around them. One says to the other, “The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together” (IV. iii, 129).

We are in serious trouble when we are unable to see ourselves as sinners in this mingled yarn. When we are unable to repent, say, “I was wrong” and ask for forgiveness. And it is why we are humble. We recognize the line in our own hearts

while seeing it in others.

An article by theologian Frederica Mathewes-Green said that “repentance is not blubbering and self-loathing. Repentance is insight” (*Christianity Today*, Feb. 4, 2002).

Repentance is insight. It is being able to see truthfully who we are, who God is, and who we are not. It is not saying “I’m sorry if anyone was offended” a dozen times. True repentance involves trying to understand why someone was offended, why someone was hurt, why a person would like to hear a true and sincere apology, and why we ourselves are offenders.

Repentance is insight and it is both personal and corporate. It is why we confess our sin both personally and corporately in the worship service. We are all in this sin together; we are caught in something larger than ourselves. Flannery O’Connor said that sin is not simply what we do; it is what we’re in. In Romans 5, in the verses following our reading this morning, the Apostle Paul gives all humankind the name of Adam. The fellowship of Adam is who we are; it names the comprehensive nature of sin.

When I was a young pastor, I heard an elderly church member respond to the news that a particular young person had gotten in some sort of trouble, “That’s the Old Adam in him.” It is also what the church has called for centuries the doctrine of “original sin.”

Although the College Board wants to censor and deny the word “systemic,” and politicians like Gov. DeSantis of Florida, our own Gov. Abbott, and plenty of others, try to politicize it, sin is *systemic*. That’s what original sin means. It is systemic. Sin is universal, it is pervasive, and it is insidious. It is more than our individual sins. We are caught in something larger than ourselves, and we cannot get out by ourselves. At the same time, it is in us. We are complicitous and responsible. To put it differently, we are addicted.

With humble insight, knowing that the line runs down all our hearts, we refuse denial. We learn to listen to others who may have insights about our own sin and failure that we have been unable to see. We listen, ask for help, ask for forgiveness, and work to change. At the same time, we name sin – with humility. When we know or see abuse or racism or bigotry or misogyny we name it, we call it out, but we do so with humility.

The line goes down the middle of each and every one of us.

“Evil lies close at hand,” said the Apostle Paul in Romans 7 when explaining why we want to do the right thing and we end up doing the very thing we hate.

We are caught in sin. It is something that we’re in that’s bigger than we are, but it is also something we’re responsible for. The truly tragic person is the one who cannot or will not admit one’s own sin and participation in sin. Repentance. If we refuse to repent, then we are blocked from receiving the promise of the gospel of God’s grace and mercy, and we are left without the power of God to free us

from sin.

Paul says that “while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5: 6). That’s us; the ungodly. He goes on to say, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ... For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom. 5: 8-10).

The beginning place for much Christian social action across the lines dividing good guys and from the bad guys and good from evil, is not that we’re really all nice people. No. It’s more radical than that. We believe that Christ died for the ungodly. Christ died for all of us. It’s the humble insight that sees the breaking down of all divisions and distinctions by the cross of Jesus. Paul tells us in II Corinthians (5:16-21) all of us, have been made one, in the reconciliation of the cross. The dividing walls have been broken down, he says in Ephesians (2:14).

Will Campbell, mentor to me, was a radical Christian. He risked his life, times too numerous to count during the Civil Rights movement. He stood for racial reconciliation and stood against injustice.

The late and great Congressman John Lewis told me while I was in a line having him autograph his books at Sam Houston State, that Will Campbell was the most courageous and compassionate person he had ever known. Coming from John

Lewis, that's saying something!

Likewise, the remarkable Civil Rights leader Bernard Lafayette, told me while autographing his book at SFA, that Will Campbell was caring and courageous and a dear friend to him and others in the Civil Rights Movement.

Highly respected by such incredible people as John Lewis and Bernard Lafayette with whom he worked and marched and organized. Will Campbell also became friends with members of the KKK. Never masking what he believed and who he was, he visited members of the Klan in jail and sat on their porches, ministering to the hurt wherever he found it.

Once, after a trial of a member of the Klan, where Will ministered to and sat with both the black family of the victim, and the white family of the accused, a mystified reporter asked, "Mr. Campbell, why do you seem to be on both sides?" Will answered, "Because I'm a [god] damned Christian."

We're all damned Christians – literally. Christ died for the ungodly. All of us. The line goes right down the middle of us all. But in Christ, we're all reconciled.

We are caught in the grip of impulses that are more powerful than our wish to do good. We are sinners and are caught in dominating systems of sin. Yet through the cross of Jesus Christ, we are freed from the systems of sin and empowered to become part of a community of Christians who together learn to live

by God's grace, who together live into the Way of Jesus Christ.

In a few minutes we are going to sing the old hymn, "There is power, power, wondering-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb." It is the *power of God* through Jesus Christ which saves us and sets us free from the grip of sin. *It is the power* of the Word of God which spoke, and it was so. *It is the power* of God which set the people free from bondage and led them through the Red Sea. *It is the power* through which a baby born in Bethlehem caused a king to be afraid. *It is the power* which overcame Satan in the wilderness. *It is the power* that lifted the paralyzed man to his feet. *It is the power* that freed the man from the demons. *It is the power* which said, "Peace! Be still!" and the wind and the waves obeyed their Creator. *It is the power* when the forces of sin and evil had done their best and sealed the door of the tomb, which raised Jesus to Life.

It is this same power of God which will sustain you through your struggles. And *it is this same power* of God which will renew our church and enable us to feed the hungry, visit the sick, forgive and receive forgiveness from each other, be reconciled, care for creation, be a safe place for LGBTQ friends, stand for justice, work for peace, and embody the Way of Jesus.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.