

Sermon 3 30 2014 From Walla Walla to the Evil Empire

Sometimes truth is much scarier than fiction. After leaving camp at 5 am, hiking through a jungle pocked with land mines-- watch your step!-- finally around seven Scott and his crew reached their outpost. The goal was spying, albeit spying with the noblest of objections. Leaning against a tree liberally sprayed with bullet holes Scott and a handful of rebel soldiers use a scope to peer through a cut in the jungle, finally catching sight of a lone soldier, a member of the terrorizing and inhumane Myanmar (meee AN mar) army. As the soldier cooks rice in a pot over a campfire Scott snaps pictures with a digital camera, which are immediately sent to the heads of rebel forces, as well as the United Nations and other diplomatic bodies.

But who is this Scott guy anyway, better known locally as Father of White Monkey, a minister and former army ranger who met and courted his wife while living in Walla Walla, Washington? Why does he creep over the border from Thailand into Myanmar, formerly Burma, a terrifying dictatorship, and spy on the government's army? Why does he send army coordinates to rebel troops, why does he carry huge backpacks of medical supplies to rural villages, once carrying a man for miles through the jungle to a medical center where his infected leg could be amputated? How did Scott go from Walla Walla to the evil empire?

Each month we consider a different theme, and this month our theme is Good and Evil. As a fairly sheltered and privileged person I have always thought of evil in a philosophical sense. The word evil reminds me of goofy devil costumes at Halloween, cartoons about having the devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. Evil is not a prominent reality in my world, more a joke. I've been very lucky. But for some people in our world, for some people in this room- evil is real. Evil is the bruises an abusive parent or spouse left, evil is the slow grind of poverty and despair. Evil is the corporate corruption that stole your pension or your very home. Evil is struggling with mental illness every day without good treatment, without any treatment. Evil is real. Looking at evil from a philosophical lens is a luxury, a luxury most of us can't afford.

We Unitarian Universalists are a rational people, our faith was founded on the rejection of superstition and the embrace of science, of scholarship. So we don't think a whole lot about evil. After all, the devil, the goofy red guy with horns, is hardly in the Bible, and we don't fear demons any more than monsters under the bed. But I believe inside all of us is the capacity for evil- it's the wolf you feed, after all, as I told the children. The wolf is there, whether he is ever given any power or not.

But what is evil, anyway? We Unitarian Universalists, the rational people with the long name, strive to live according to seven principles, and the seventh is respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. Meaning we are all connected, we are all tied up in this life together, and how I treat you matters. How I treat every living thing matters. We are one.

So for me evil is making choices that I know will hurt my fellow humans. Causing them pain or anguish through neglect or cruel intent. Or, worst of all, not recognizing that their lives have meaning, that their lives equal ours.

Purposeful or thoughtless, causing suffering is evil.

For a sheltered person like me, evil can be easy to forget about. After all, few people have ever hurt me on purpose. But Scott, our jungle adventurer, grew up in Thailand, which borders Myanmar, and he served in the army in Thailand as an adult. Scott saw firsthand the evil of the Myanmar regime. He works closely with one young woman, Hsa, who, at age 27, survived the army's invasion of her village. Her mother and father were quickly murdered; her sister was brutally raped and then killed. Her other sister was led away in chains, a prisoner, a fate worse than death. Hsa managed to escape into the jungle and roamed alone for

two years before joining a rebel army, fighting the Myanmar military that regularly invades and destroys villages such as hers.

Scott founded and runs the Free Burma Rangers, a non-violent humanitarian group funded mainly by religious groups in the United States. The group began in 1997 when Scott was working in Thailand, and a huge flood of refugees from Myanmar crossed his path, escaping the Burmese army. Grabbing four backpacks of medical supplies, using the jungle as his cover, he snuck into Burma to treat victims. There he found whole villages burned to the ground, women sexually assaulted and then murdered, men with limbs cut off bleeding to death on the ground. He saw the ravages of evil. As he treated anyone still breathing he mentally planned the Free Burma Rangers, his nonviolent response to the uprising of evil all around him.

Burma has been a nation in turmoil since the Dutch colonists left in the 1940's. At issue are the small villages of ethnic minorities along the border- they would like more autonomy, while the rulers of Burma would like more control. Violence increased in the early 1990's, when leaders realized there are valuable natural resources along the border, and sent Burma's army, ironically named the State

Peace and Development Council, to destroy minority settlements so they could be insured easy access.

The Free Burma Rangers sneak over the border from Thailand to Burma, or Myanmar, to deliver medical supplies to isolated communities, to alert villages of impending invasions so they can flee, to evacuate those displaced, and set up schools for children. It is a gorilla-style operation, and it is quite a change from sleepy Walla Walla's wine country.

The question of why is one Scott gets frequently- why live such a dangerous life? And it isn't just Scott out there- his wife Karen and there three small children are also full-time Free Burma Rangers. Scott is called Father of White Monkey because his daughter learned to crawl in Myanmar, and to locals she looked like a little white monkey on the ground. Now 12, she helps train rebel soldiers during mock battles. Why live in the rural jungle, sneaking across borders, exposing your children to disease and constant stress. Why not move back to Walla Walla? But Scott believes that the only response to evil is love- in fact the slogan of the Free Burma Rangers is "Love each other. Unite and work for freedom, justice, and peace. Forgive and don't hate each other. Pray with faith, act with courage, never

surrender.” After seeing the destruction, after meeting the victims, how could Scott and Karen do anything else?

Scott and Karen are evangelical Christians, and their faith in God inspires them to face evil on the other side of the world, and transform it into justice. Evangelical Christians talk about evil a lot more than we Unitarian Universalists do, evil is a spiritual force in their theology. The devil is, for evangelicals, very real. But despite our theological differences, and despite my sadness at their inhumanity regarding people who are not straight, I am inspired by the way their faith is a full-time endeavor, driving them to face the real evils in our world. Evangelicals are fighting poverty on every continent, preaching the dangers of fossil fuels, and lobbying against foreclosures. If you compare percentages- the number of activist UU's compared, per capita, to the percent of evangelicals- well, I don't think we would like those numbers so much.

But why are evangelicals so much more social justice oriented than Unitarian Universalists? Do we have to believe in an actual devil in order to get fired up about opposing evil? Is our rationality preventing us from creating justice? Or is it our privilege? Unitarian Universalists are, per capita, the wealthiest denomination

in the United States, and the most educated. Do those factors make us too insulated from the very real evil in our world?

The answer is...I don't know. But I do know that inside of me are two wolves, fighting for my attention. Which one will I feed? The ability, even the desire, to do evil, is inside all of us. Will we act in ways that honor the one-ness of all living creatures? Will we ignore the suffering of people we don't think are really equal to us-people of a different color, or poor people, or the very old or very young?

Every day, with every decision, we decide- will I feed the evil wolf, or the good wolf? When we see the suffering of our fellow beings and act- we feed the good wolf. Whether as far away as Myanmar or as close as the neighborhood block meeting, our actions feed either the good wolf or the evil wolf.

We Unitarian Universalists don't believe in a red devil with pointy ears any more than we believe monsters live under our bed- still, evil can be seen, with our rational minds, all round us. Knowing we live in a web of creation with all other creatures, knowing our lives are equal to every other person's, we must make choices that combat this evil.

Let us live by the slogan of the Free Burma Rangers: “Love each other. Unite and work for freedom, justice, and peace. Forgive and don’t hate each other. Act with courage, never surrender.”