

“What Does ‘Holy’ Mean?”

a sermon by Dan Lillie
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A Question

The question caught me off-guard. As I lead Children’s Chapel that day, I remember thinking that *I* would be the one asking the questions, and, of course, supplying the answers. And so, when the little hand shot into the air as I was teaching them hymn #1008, *When Our Heart Is In A Holy Place*, I was not prepared for the very deep question that came from such a small voice: “What does Holy mean?”

I don’t remember exactly what I said in response; something about the holy describing things and feelings that we deeply respect and admire, things that are sacred, special, and set apart.

The fact that I was caught off-guard, that I didn’t have a good answer ready told me I hadn’t wrestled enough with my own understanding of the Holy. As a leader of a spiritual community, I wanted a more adequate answer.

Everything is Holy

Peter Mayer will be join us next weekend, and I am so excited for his visit. My favorite song of his is called *Holy Now*, and you’ll have an opportunity to hear it at his concert on Saturday. The essence of the song, goes from Peter as a young boy being taught in Sunday school that certain things are holy, but eventually learning to expand his understanding of the holy to include everything; all of nature and creation. This epiphany leads him to see awe and wonder in common encounters and everyday moments.

Challenges to “Everything is Holy” – It’s Meaningless

“Everything is Holy” is a nice idea, but it’s not without some challenges. For example, some people argue that if *everything* is holy, then doesn’t that render it meaningless, because there is nothing set apart as sacred and special?

According to these folks, the holy is, by definition, that which *is not* everywhere, in everything. That the holy is remarkable and exceptional.

And to this point, I would remind us that what is considered “remarkable” and “exceptional” is a matter of perspective and experience.

For example: many days go by in which I don’t see a cow. In fact, seeing a cow would be an exception to the kinds of things and beings I encounter in my everyday existence. To be remarkable literally means to be worthy of remark, and I’ll tell you what: if I saw a cow wandering down Carlisle here on my way to church, I’d sure remark about it to my wife Emily at the end of the day!

Now, if you live in Los Lunas or Belen, I imagine your chances of seeing a cow on a daily basis goes up considerably.

Exceptional in some contexts is ordinary in others.

Could it be that everything is holy, but not all things are holy to everyone?

My chalice necklace has meaning and significance to me. It is a reminder of my Unitarian Universalist values. To me, it is special, sacred, and holy. To a non-Unitarian Universalist, it is likely no more than a symbol on a string.

You know what they say about one person’s trash being another’s treasure, and this applies to how we think about the holy. Everything has a place in the world, but not everything is assigned the same value by everyone: people have preferences! We have favorites! Likes and dislikes, pet peeves and guilty pleasures!

And not just people. My dog Max doesn’t care for the gourmet dog cookies I bought for him, but he’ll take a scoop of peanut butter anytime. Now, I don’t by any stretch of the imagination believe that Max thinks peanut butter is holy. But one of the amazing things gifts of being alive is our ability to act and choose according to our needs and desires. And, as humans, this includes where we look for the holy.

If the holy gives us clues to understand the universe, and our place and purpose in it, then it makes sense that there is a subjective quality to the holy that can be acknowledged and appreciated, while simultaneously understanding that all of creation is holy by virtue of its existence; that everything literally has a place in the universe, and that anything may provide a sacred glimpse at the holy for someone.

This idea, when applied to people, is our First Principle: we recognize that every person has inherent worth and dignity, but let’s not pretend that some people aren’t closer to us than others. We can love people to different degrees, while

still affirming everybody's right to be loved. The right to be loved is universal, but I do not love everybody equally.

And so it is with the holy; that it is in everything, but not equally so to everyone.

Challenges to "Everything is Holy" – The Problem of Evil

Another challenge connected to the "Everything is Holy" idea was raised by today's reading: if *everything* is holy, this includes the good and the bad. Love, joy, and blessings, as well as pain, sin, and evil. Are all of these really holy? What about suffering, oppression, and injustice?

It has been a difficult week: one individual in pain choosing to inflict pain, violence, and destruction on so many others in Las Vegas; the current administration granting the right to discriminate against the LGBTQ community in the name of religious freedom, and allowing businesses to deny birth control in their health insurance plans for the same reason.

And the difficulties didn't start this week. In the past few months, we saw neo-nazis and white supremacists marching openly in the streets of Charlottesville; we saw the ending of DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program; we saw multiple attempts to dismantle our current healthcare system, and we saw discriminatory travel bans put in place.

Where is the holy in all of this? How can there be anything sacred in all of these atrocities?

Evil in the World

These are realities of our world. Evil is real and present. And I don't mean just the propensity for evil, but the actual manifestation of it.

Evil in Us

Now, here's the part where I might lose some of you:

It is easy enough to believe that evil exists in "the world"; but often, we who identify as "good people" (and let me assure you, I know that you are good people); but we have a hard time believing and accepting our own individual capacity for evil.

Stick with me here:

In his book *Simply Pray*, Erik Walker Wikstrom says that we should, "look unblinkingly at the wounded and broken places in ourselves, seeing the ways

these wounds continue to hobble us and may continue wounding others. From the petty to the seriously problematic, we look at all of the parts of ourselves that we'd rather not see so that we can come to terms with the fact – and it is a fact – that these are a part of who we are. Acknowledging this doesn't make us any less. It actually makes us more – more whole, more complete, more authentic.”

So let's acknowledge it.

Evil is real, both “out there” in the world, but also within us- in our own hearts and minds. And I'm not just talking about sin, which is missing the mark. Evil goes beyond not achieving what we set out to do, or failing at our best intentions.

Evil is darker. It exists in the moments when our intentions are not good; when we are motivated by hate and vengeance. Evil is when we wish punishment or suffering on another because we have a warped sense of justice, one that values retaliation or retribution over restoration.

The reality of the world must acknowledge evil. The reality of ourselves must acknowledge, not just that we have evil thoughts once in a while, but that we act on them sometimes. Maybe not “high stakes” evil. But to think the only negative things we do are accidents is naive. We have all done things that we knew in advance we shouldn't do, and went ahead and did them anyway. I'm not talking about rule-breaking – goodness knows we could use more civil disobedience at times – I'm talking about being the source of moral injury. Of being able to discern wrong from right, and choosing wrong.

It would be so much easier to eradicate evil in the world if it wasn't so ingrained in us. Russian author Aleksandr (zol JEN iss sen) Solzhenitsyn observes:

“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 [their] own heart?”

So what do we do with this? What are we supposed to do knowing that there is evil within every human heart, including our own?

The only way to prevent evil moments from occurring is to admit to ourselves that they are possible; that we humans (and we, as individuals) are able and sometimes willing to do evil.

This is why we must be mindful, and act intentionally. We must be aware of what is influencing our decisions, and we must be able to recognize when the evil intentions that we are all capable of are weighing too heavily on us.

The Name of the Holy is Pronounced through Your Being

But don't be disheartened. As important as it is to recognize the evil within us, we do not have to let it define us. I battle evil within myself, but I am not an evil person. In fact, just the opposite. I am holy.

In my favorite poem from Angela's meditation manual, she reassures me:

You, with your broken heart and your seeking,
you are the utterance of the timeless word.

The name of the Holy is pronounced through your being.

I find this thought comforting.

I am holy. You are holy. The name of the Holy is pronounced through your being. We are holy beings in a holy universe.

Upon reflecting, it occurs to me why I find comfort in this idea: it makes facing the difficult... well, less difficult.

I know it's not easy. I've listened as many of you have opened up and shared the pain in your hearts; the fear, and anger, and sadness you carry.

And I carry some too.

270 miles south of here, my grandpa, my last remaining grandparent, is in a hospital bed in El Paso. I'm leaving after church today to visit him. As I was preparing this message on the holy, I was also preparing to leave town. And both of these tasks had me reflecting on the holy. It feels like holy work to contemplate and meditate on the meaning of the holy. And it felt like a holy act to prepare for my trek, for my pilgrimage to the sacred site of my grandfather's bedside. I don't look forward to seeing him sick and in pain. But I can push through my own discomfort, because I know the time I spend there will be

sacred, special, and set apart. It will be holy. To me and to him. But likely not to you, and that's ok; I don't expect it to. You have your own holy moments to attend to.

But regardless of how we will encounter the holy differently, I want you to know that I see you, and I recognize the holiness within you. And while the holy may be too complicated for us, I take comfort in knowing it is big enough to hold us.

The Holy Makes Me Scared and Hopeful

So, what does holy mean? I'm still not sure. But I think it scares me. And it gives me hope. Scared to face the evil, in the world, yes, but even more afraid of the evil darkening the corners of my own heart.

And hopeful that I can accept myself as holy; that I can truly come to believe that the name of the holy is pronounced through my being. Hopeful that I can do better, and be better at rooting out the darkness I harbor; that I can acknowledge it, name it, and say, "you are a part of me, but you do not control me. I do not choose evil. I choose love."

May it be so.