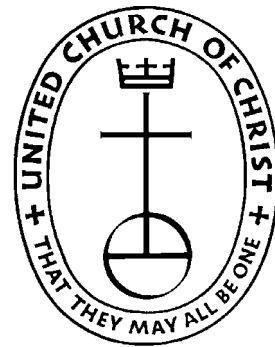


What Dog Do We Feed the Most?

A Sermon By —
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This sermon discusses the reasons why good people do bad things, as there is the potential for both good and bad in all of us. It calls on us to remind one another that we are good people, to call one another to be the best people we can be – to keep alive our hopes for justice for all, for peace, for a sustainable world.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
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What Dog Do We Feed the Most?

In a previous church, a couple told me they were leaving the church because they disagreed with my theology. They said they thought I would make a better rabbi than a Christian minister.

They didn't mean that as a compliment, but in a way it was. The Jesus of history was a Jew steeped in the practices and stories of Judaism; he would have been far more comfortable with the tales of the Torah than with redemption theology anchored in dying for the sins of the world. I don't think the historical Jesus would recognize himself in the Christ figure of early Christianity.

So yes, maybe I would be a better rabbi and maybe that's why my theology has often been shaped by the writings of rabbis. Today, I want to turn to one of my favorites, Harold Kushner, who became well known because of his book about why bad things happen to good people. But today I want to look at his insights concerning why good people do bad things. Most of the ideas I will share today are his; I am merely the communicator.

Kushner asked, "Why do good people do bad things? If we all have an innate need to think of ourselves as good, why do things that undercut our goodness? Why do things that should be easy to recognize as unacceptable? Are people naturally bad," he asked, "and is good behavior only a thin veneer, the result of social pressure and the fear of being caught?"

Well, I certainly don't think people are naturally bad. I have said from this pulpit many times that I believe in original blessing, not original sin – in an innate goodness within all people.

Now certainly there are people whose lives reflect horrendous evil – Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin, Charles Manson or any number of serial killers. I make no claim to being able to explain such evil, except I think it often reflects serious mental illness or dramatic trauma early in life. I once heard a psychiatrist at San Quentin say that every killer she had worked with had faced such horrendous abuse as a child that the killer had lost all sense of right and wrong, all ability to make moral decisions. Or Kushner says, "It may be that some people are born without the ability to develop a fully functioning conscience, in the same way that some people are born with a malfunctioning limb or

organ.”

But I am less interested in explaining profound evil than in looking at why good people – religious people, educated people, people like you and me – sometimes do bad things.

Now Rabbi Kushner says that “If we think of all the people in the world spread along a continuum of virtue, there will be a few saints at one end and some truly horrible people at the other. Closer to the sinners’ end we will find people so angry at the world that they feel entitled to hurt others, people so focused on their own feelings they don’t care about the feelings of those they cheat and betray. Closer to the saints’ end of the continuum we find people more like ourselves, good people who sometimes do bad things for reasons we don’t entirely understand.”

So the question for Kushner becomes, “What makes good, decent people violate sincerely held moral standards?”

And he offers five reasons why we may do the wrong thing, even knowing it to be wrong, even knowing it violates the values we affirm.

First, sometimes we choose to do the wrong thing because we are afraid and feel we have to protect ourselves.

In my Christmas Eve sermon, I mentioned the story about Abraham and Sarah traveling through Egypt. Abraham feared that the Egyptians might lust after Sarah and kill Abraham to get him out of the way. So Abraham asked Sarah to pose as his unmarried sister, and thus, although she might be violated, his life would be spared. Abraham, a good person choosing to do the wrong thing because of his fear and desire to protect himself.

Rabbi Kushner wrote about survivors of the Nazi death camps who became good, generous and caring people after their liberation but who still shed tears of shame when they remember things they did to stay alive in inhuman circumstances.

Fear can drive us to compromise our values. Fear for ourselves, for our children, for our nation – physical fear, economic fear, fear of social rejection.

Secondly, sometimes good people do bad things because they believe that the end justifies the means. Young Israeli soldiers did some incredibly awful things during Israel’s siege of Gaza. These were teenagers, just out of high school. They weren’t bad people. They didn’t have histories of setting animals afire or being bullies – but they shot unarmed civilians, they beat children and old men, they blew up buildings know-

ing that women and children were huddled together inside, they prevented ambulances from reaching those who were dying. They didn't do this out of fear; all the power was on their side. They had no reason to be afraid. No, somehow they believed Gaza was a threat to their cherished Jewish state and so for them, the end, a secure Israel, justified the horrible things they did.

Perhaps it is the same with the American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison. Were those young soldiers naturally evil people or were they people convinced that the prisoners under their control were such a threat in a 9-11 world that the end justified the torture and abuse?

What about the college music major – perhaps a talented pianist – who chooses to cheat on a chemistry exam? After all, what does chemistry have to do with producing good music? The dishonesty is seen as justified by the end – getting a degree that would open doors to a career in music.

And in most cases there is some sense of guilt about doing wrong to achieve a good end. Rabbi Kushner believes that if people feel guilty about violating their basic values, that is a reflection of their goodness. Kushner said, “Only good people feel guilty. Evil people deny, justify, rationalize and blame others without accepting their share of responsibility. Only morally sensitive people struggle with the gap between who they are and who they know they ought to be.”

Let me move to the third reason why good people do bad things. **Sometimes it is because doing what they know to be right seems too hard or because the advantage to be gained by taking a shortcut is too enticing.**

I wonder about Zacchaeus, the tax gatherer befriended by Jesus. Scorned by his own people because he collected the harsh tribute demanded by the Roman oppressors, he probably cheated as well, adding on extra for himself. Did he do that because riches were just too enticing?

Or think of the steroid scandals in athletics. Are those who use those drugs afraid they won't succeed without them, or are they too enticed by the promise of bigger contracts, more fame?

Because doing right seems too hard, because the rewards of shortcuts are too enticing – that may explain why people violate their own standards in the workplace, at school or even at home.

Rabbi Kushner's fourth reason: **Sometimes people who have done something wrong are so ashamed they follow with another bad deed to keep the first misstep**

from being discovered.

There is a classic biblical example. King David wanted to sleep with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers. So he summoned her to the palace – she had no choice, it was in essence rape, and she became pregnant.

He couldn't admit what he had done, so he began a cover-up. He recalled her husband from the battlefield hoping the husband would sleep with her and the child would be seen as his. But the husband was rigorously obedient to Hebrew military morality; even after David got him drunk, he would not sleep with his wife while his colleagues were on the battlefield.

So David added more deceit to this spiral of deception, ordering the husband, Uriah, to the front lines where he would be killed, which he was, and then David could take Bathsheba as his own.

This was a spiral of escalating deceit. One lie led to another; one act of violence on top of another. Often unfaithful spouses spin a tangled web of lies to cover up their faults. Sometimes good people find themselves so enmeshed in deceit they become unable to tell the truth from the fiction.

Now the fifth and final reason why good people do bad things. **We often do so out of anger.** Kushner says, "They may feel that life, or society, is unfair to them, so why should they be fair to society?"

A boss lies or puts blame on an employee for the boss' own mistake. The angry employee feels justified in getting back at the boss in whatever way possible. In its extreme, this is the anger that happens when a disgruntled employee returns to a worksite with a gun and seeks revenge.

There is another story about King David, who made Jerusalem the capital of his new Empire and proudly danced before the Ark of the Covenant as it was moved to Jerusalem. There was much celebrating, and David's wife, Michal, daughter of Israel's first king, Saul, was offended by her husband's exuberance. She criticized him for acting like a commoner rather than a king. Hurt and angry, David struck back with a mean comment about the failures of her father. The story ends with the inference that their love died that day because they could never erase the angry words they had spoken.

Kushner wrote, "I suspect we can all remember words we spoke or things we did when we were angry that we felt justified in doing at the time and now wish we could take back, or we at least wish we could convince people that those words and deeds don't accurately reflect the kind of people we are."

So five reasons why good people sometimes do bad things:

- Because we are afraid and feel we must protect ourselves.
- Because we believe the end justifies the means.
- Because doing what we feel is right is too hard or the advantage gained by taking a shortcut is too enticing.
- Because our shame at one bad act sets off a chain of other misdeeds.
- Or because of our anger.

But Kushner says, “The question still is – what kind of people are we? Are we naturally good until external circumstances compromise our goodness? Or are we naturally weak and deceitful, needing conscience or outside authority to keep us in line?”

And his answer is that, “Every human being has both good and bad tendencies, impulses to charity and impulses to selfishness, the desire to be truthful and the desire to lie. These tendencies are in constant tension within us.”

The story of Jacob dominates the Book of Genesis. The twins, Jacob and Esau, developed into two very different kinds of people. Jacob used his clever mind and deceit to abuse Esau and eventually fled from Israel out of fear of Esau’s revenge. Then Jacob himself fell victim to the deceit of his father-in-law. Jacob ultimately did well for himself in a foreign land but yearned to go home, unsure if he could reconcile with Esau.

The night before he was to meet Esau, he went off by himself and the storyteller says someone attacked him from behind. They wrestled all night and at sunrise, a wounded Jacob, sought and received a blessing from the one with whom he struggled.

Over the centuries there has been speculation about who the storyteller envisioned the wrestler to be: Esau’s guardian angel, a demon or God? But Kushner is convinced the mysterious attacker was meant to be part of Jacob himself. The attacker comes when Jacob is alone and is exactly as strong a Jacob. Kushner feels the storyteller saw the attacker as Jacob’s conscience, summoning him to rise above his bad impulses. The struggle is between the part of him that wins by cleverness and fraud, and the part of him that feels called by God to become an exemplary person.

So Rabbi Kushner says, “I believe you can’t be a complete person without having to wrestle with your own demons – and for that matter, with your own angel. Like the

person who lifts weights at the gym to become stronger, we strengthen our moral fiber by the exercise of resisting temptation." He says, "I want to believe that about myself because I know all too well the impulses that summon me to be selfish, impatient and insensitive. I want to believe that about other people. I want to see them in the fullness of their humanity, to admire them for their goodness even as I am aware of the sordidness of which they are capable."

There is a story about a Native American tribal leader talking about his own inner struggles. He said, "There are two dogs inside me. One dog is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time." So someone asked him which dog usually wins. "The one I feed the most."

In the daily wrestling matches that set the tone of our lives, sometimes the mean dog wins and sometimes the good dog wins. But we have got to keep trying to feed that good dog.

I think that is a vital part of what the church, temple or mosque is all about. Here we remind one another that we are good people and here we encourage one another to feed the good dog. Here we call one another to be the best people we can be – to keep alive our hopes for justice for all, for peace, for a sustainable world. Here we feed the good dog by making sure we remember all of God's people deserve shelter, water, food, clothing, decent health care and the freedom to be themselves.

As we move into a new year, as we have another opportunity to put some of the past behind us and to make promises to ourselves about how we will live from this point on, let us remember to keep asking ourselves, "What kind of a person do I want to be?" "How can I be a good person who resists the temptations of selfishness?" "How can I make sure that I feed the good dog?"

Amen.