

It could be worse; it will be better

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Genesis 6:1-6 (NRSV)

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.

Then the Lord said, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.”

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown. The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

Romans 13:1-6

In the final section of his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul appealed to the Roman Christians to be transformed in thought and action, to be conformed to Christ and not to the patterns of the world. This was not a prescription for revolution, however.

Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, because there is no authority except from God, and the [authorities] that are have been appointed by God. And so the one who resists an authority has opposed what God has ordained, and those who have opposed [that] will be judged, because rulers are not a source of fear to good conduct, but to bad.

Do you want to be without fear of an authority? Do good, and you will have its approval, because it is God’s servant for good toward you. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not bear the sword for nothing. The [authority] is God’s avenging servant for wrath toward the one who does wrong.

So you must submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience. This is why you pay taxes, too, because they are God’s servants, constantly attending to this very thing.

Children’s Story

When Nehemiah the governor inspected the city of Jerusalem, he saw one big problem: the city’s wall was broken down. Without the wall, Jerusalem was not safe. Enemies could attack the city and destroy it.

So Nehemiah organized the people into groups – priests and goldsmiths and regular families – and put each group in charge of rebuilding a section of the wall.

It was hard work, with lots of stone and brick to set into place. The enemies of Jerusalem laughed because they didn’t think priests and goldsmiths and regular families could rebuild the wall. Those enemies soon discovered they were wrong.

When the wall reached half its height, the enemies planned an attack. But Nehemiah found out about their plot. He appointed half of the wall builders to stand guard, and he had all the rest of the wall builders – priests and goldsmiths and regular families – he had them all strap on swords, so they could also fight if they needed to.

They worked from morning until night, day after day, until the wall was finished. At last, the city was safe.

Of course, Nehemiah knew that it really was God who kept the city safe. But he also knew that God would use the wall to do that.

Sermon

Last week was not a quiet week in our woebegone world. Eruptions of violence continued in and around Baghdad. We're not surprised by that. The cycle of violence there seems to have unstoppable momentum. And, of course, last Monday there was Virginia Tech. We've seen it too many times now – whether at the Amish schoolhouse last fall or at Columbine High School eight years ago – we've seen it too many times to be surprised. Still we're shocked, we're horrified. We shake our heads in disgust. We hang our heads in despair. It's too much. It's too many. It's all gone too far!

But it could be worse. It could. I don't say that to be glib. And I would never say it to victims. I would never say it to the families of victims or to a community in shock. But it's true. It could be worse.

These outbreaks of violence, whether random or systematic, are not contrary to human nature. Violence and its blood-stained fruit express the ugly heart of human nature. Genesis 6 says that “every inclination of the thoughts of the human [is] only evil all the time.” It's not a temporary affliction. It's not something found only in an “axis of evil” over there. There is an axis of evil that runs through every human heart. There is an axis of evil that runs through every nation, including our own, and through every culture. The Heidelberg catechism puts the matter succinctly. It asks, can you “perfectly” love your neighbor as yourself? The answer is, “No.” But not just, “No. I can't love my neighbor perfectly.” Rather, “No. I have a natural tendency to hate . . . my neighbor.” Violence, senseless or otherwise, is not an aberration. Violence expresses the thorough corruption of sin that has inflected and afflicted humanity almost from the beginning.

If we had our way, the end would be upon us. Left to ourselves, we would destroy ourselves. Some of you remember the Cold War doctrine called MAD: Mutual Assured Destruction. If the Soviets launched their ICBMs at us, we would launch our ICBMs at them. We would be destroyed, but they would be destroyed, too. Left to ourselves, assured destruction would be the outcome. And on the way to destruction, there would be violence on every street, there would be violence in every home and in every school. So it could be worse.

It could be. But for some reason, it isn't. Life is more peaceful, life is more whole, than human corruption would lead us to expect. Wars are common, but they're not everywhere. So far the missiles haven't been launched. The MADness of Mutual Assured Destruction has been avoided. And most schools, most homes, most neighborhoods are reasonably quiet and safe. The exceptions are newsworthy exactly because they are exceptions. And while here in Ohio payday lenders may operate as state-sanctioned loan sharks, charging fees and interest of up to 391% on an annual basis, most financial transactions are honest and many of them are fair.

It could be worse. But for some reason, it isn't. For some reason. Some people suppose that there's enough good left in human nature to overcome our worst tendencies; that we all may have our faults, but most people are decent and aren't about to swerve and run you over when you're walking down a country road; that human nature is not thoroughly corrupt; that evil people really are the exception.

And doesn't that picture fit with our actual experience? Doesn't that picture reflect our perception? Aren't most of the people we know pretty decent human beings? Isn't the whole idea of human sin and corruption exaggerated, a pessimistic pronouncement from people prone to perceive perversion? Aren't there far more good guys than bad guys?

Our Reformed tradition, though, has a different perception and a different explanation. It starts here: Human beings are thoroughly corrupt; human beings are prone to all sorts of evil. Last Sunday was Holocaust Remembrance Day. The Reformed tradition concludes that there is an Auschwitz latent in

every human heart, that there is a Holocaust latent in every culture. Human beings are thoroughly corrupt – that’s where the Reformed tradition begins – but . . . But God restrains us, God restrains our evil.

The Flood story, which we heard introduced a few minutes ago, tells what happens when God lets go of the restraints. In Creation, God separated the waters above from the waters below, and he pushed aside the lower waters so that dry land could appear. But the waters above and the waters below threatened to overwhelm the earth and destroy its life, so God held those waters back, God restrained them. With the Flood, however, God let go of those restraints and let the waters do their worst. So earth and its life were destroyed, except for a small remnant, a remnant that included one human family. It was the best human family, but it was a corrupt human family. And after the Flood, human nature was as bad as it had been before.

There is corruption in every one of us, there is corruption in the best of us, not just in certain, exceptional people, like Seung-Hui Cho. But, by an exercise of grace, grace that extends to all people (thus it is given the name “common grace” in the Reformed tradition) – by an exercise of grace, God restrains human corruption. God does this in many ways, but I want to mention just one of them, namely, the structures that have been put in place by God in order to limit the effects of sin and evil. These structures include government (that’s the focus of Romans 13), education, social norms, conscience, peer pressure (it’s not always bad), treaties, laws, contracts, families, and much more. All these structures restrain us. They keep us from doing our worst. For its part, Romans 13 highlights the restraining effects of government authority, specifically how fear of getting in trouble with the law keeps us in line.

So we have all of these restraining structures, and they are a gift from God, an expression of grace (common grace) to all people. But those structures are not without their weaknesses. The structures themselves can be corrupt and full of evil. Nazi Germany, of course, is the paramount example of the corruption of government authority. And the structures sometimes develop cracks. Like a levee, the structures keep the roiling waters of evil within bounds. But when cracks appear, water breaks through the levee and evil can become a flood.

Last week, serious cracks appeared once again in the levee. On Wednesday six separate bombs exploded in Baghdad. They exploded at checkpoints and in marketplaces. When the smoke and dust cleared, one hundred eighty people were dead and dozens and dozens more were wounded and maimed. All this despite the existence of a democratically elected government in Iraq. All this despite a “troop surge” in Baghdad. And on Monday Seung-Hui Cho went on his rampage. There were a university, police forces, mental health agencies, and peers. But all of them were powerless against the evil. And on a wind-swept spring day, Cho’s bullets left thirty-two others and himself dead.

Sure, it could be worse. But last week was pretty bad.

If God doesn’t restrain evil fully, if cracks appear again and again in the levee; if God won’t destroy evil with a Flood or something like it, because that doesn’t work anyway – if God doesn’t restrain evil fully and if God won’t destroy evil, then what? Then what?

Some time ago, a wide crack appeared in the levee at Golgotha. God planted a cross in that crack. The cross didn’t stem the flood of evil, it merely redirected it. Evil was poured out upon Jesus until his body was battered, bled-out, lifeless. Rather than destroy evil, Jesus let evil destroy himself. He made himself the path of least resistance, and he was washed away.

That was Friday. But on Sunday, evil was shown to be ultimately empty. Evil is negation, evil brings death. But the gift of God is life and its affirmation: Jesus stood again upon this earth!

So we carry on in a troubled world. We carry on in a Virginia Teach world, in a Baghdad world. We carry on, and we thank God, sometimes through gritted teeth, sometimes through tears, that it’s not as bad as it could be. And we never let go of hope, because Jesus was raised from death. And we know that, though it could be worse, it will be better.

Meanwhile we do what we can to shore up the levee. We can't stop the violence in Baghdad. We can't stop the madness of the Seung-Hui Chos of the world. But here's something we can do. It won't rid the world of evil, but it will begin to change one corner of the world. We can come out in force on May 7 to the BREAD Nehemiah Assembly. We can listen to Nehemiah's call to rebuild the wall.

Have you noticed that it's always the poor who get flooded out when the levee won't hold? It's the poor who pay 391% interest on short-term loans. It's the poor who don't have access to decent, basic health care. It's the poor who find their kids failing to get an adequate education.

On May 7 we can fill some of the gaps in the wall. We can be a means of God's grace, of God's common grace, to shield the poor from evil, evil that our own skin color and bank accounts protect us from.

The BREAD organization has a goal that each congregation brings its average weekly attendance to the Assembly on May 7. Last year we had thirty-two there. This year we pledged thirty-five. But we could have fifty or even more! (Kids count, too, and it's a great place for kids to be!)

Will you come and shore up the levee?

Will you come and rebuild the wall?

Will you be a means of God's grace?