**DEPRAVIA**

August 30, 2015

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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**otal Depravity** (also called radical corruption) is a theological doctrine derived from the Augustinian concept of original sin. It is a theological position that every person born into the world is enslaved to the service of sin and apart from the grace of God is utterly unable to choose to follow God, refrain from evil, or accept the gift of salvation as it is offered in Jesus Christ. This theological approach to the Bible has included those whose thinking has been shaped by the writing of John Calvin and so that includes Presbyterians.

**Summary**

So this morning’s message will sort of put us back in school with an analytical lecture of sorts that examines our Mark passage this morning by looking at the nature of depravity as it relates to intention, explores the charge of those who are complaining about Jesus’ teaching, and then says something positive about our intentions that seem to flow from what Jesus has to say.

**Depravity**

If you were to ask most people what the word “depraved means” they would tell you that it refers to someone who is marked by corruption or evil. Some would point to Jim Jones who duped followers into joining him in Jonestown as someone who was depraved. Still, some would assume that it refers to someone who is just plain crazy.

I rather liked the use of the word “Depravia” which I heard for the first time when preparing to officiate at the funeral of Barbara Stewart here in this room. Barbara was a bright woman with many interests, but was particularly known as “The Kazoo Lady.” She was the author of *The Complete How to Kazoo* and one of the wittiest members and found of Kazoophony. She became a professional kazooist after studying at the Eastman School of Music when master flute teacher Joseph Mariano told her that everyone ought to be an expert at something and so she turned to kazooing.

Barbara appeared at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall and made television appearances on the Tonight Show. She performed with Arthur Fiedler, PDQ Bach and Frank Zappa. She was even a member of the Cornell Athletic Hall of Fame and in Moscow 1990 set the Soviet women’s pole vault record. After that record, members of Kazoophony introduced their music and themselves with a heavy Eastern European or Russian accent and asked where they learned to kazoo mentioned their home country of Depravia. They leave you with the impression that people who think that Bach’s music sounds best when played by an orchestra of kazoos must be from the country of Depravia.

But, if I were to ask you about things that are really a sign of an activity that was depraved you would probably tell me things like:

- A perpetrator who kills innocent people to spread terror to others;

- A person who painfully exploits the trust of another for their own pleasure;

- A person who commits a crime where the intent is to cause the physical disfigurement of the victim?

This is not an exhaustive list, just one to prompt us to consider what we might characterize as depraved. But if you're like most people of goodwill, these are the kinds of things that strike you as awful.

Trying to think about which crime shows more depravity than another gives us a taste of how prosecutors think when deciding what penalties to seek for the wrongdoers brought before them in especially heinous cases. Is one crime more atrocious, cruel, depraved or vile than another? And laws themselves do not necessarily include standards to determine this. Prosecutors may be left to make charges based on a visceral response, or one driven by political considerations, bias or sensationalism.

**Depravity Standard**

To help those who must make such judgments, forensic psychiatrist Dr. Michael Welner and his team at the Forensic Panel in New York are seeking *to quantify and codify wickedness for use by the judicial system*.

To develop such a standard -- the Depravity Standard, if you will -- Welner's team has issued a survey that asks a broad spectrum of adults to rate 25 violent crime elements. The results will be used to provide evidence-based guidelines to help reduce the degree of subjectivity throughout the judicial process. As Welner explains it, "A Depravity Standard that is rooted in specific hallmarks of intent, actions, attitude and victimology keeps prosecutors accountable to fully investigate a crime for these unique qualities so that evidence informs decision making."[[1]](#footnote-1)

When ready, the Depravity Standard will not be based just on what offenders actually did, but also, insofar as possible to determine, what their *intent* was in doing the crime. Intention can be defined as a mental state that includes a commitment to carrying out an action or actions in the future, often to reach a selected goal. Of course, judging a person's intent is more difficult than judging that person's actions, because we can't actually see what's in a person's mind. *Yet that's where deeds, both good and evil, start.*

Jesus made that point when he said, in the words of today's text, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

The Depravity Standard strikes us as a good idea -- indeed, anything that makes the justice system more equitable is a worthwhile endeavor -- but its focus is on how to charge a perpetrator *after* a terrible crime has been committed, not on how to prevent him or her from committing the terrible crime to begin with. Jesus, however, points us to "the within" part of us as *the place where change needs to take place to begin with*. And thus, generations of Christian preachers have rightly called us to get our hearts right with God, and by "hearts," they really mean the seat of our passions, so that our intentions are not evil.

**Eric Hoffer**

A number of years ago now I thumbed through some notes on books that I inherited from my father. In them he mentioned a number of people whose writing had a profound impact on his thinking and theological development. Among those were Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, Dag Hammarskjöld, C. S. Lewis, and Eric Hoffer. When we talked about who had wrought the most significant change for him the answer was Eric Hoffer.

He had noted references to a number of Hoffer’s books:

 The Temper of our Time

 Working and Thinking on the Waterfront

 First Things, Last things and

 Before the Sabbath.

But none of these seemed to have made as much impact by this stevedore of a writer as *The True Believer*. Hoffer was a longshoreman, a rough worker who seemed to understand the challenges of hard working people. In *The True Believer* Hoffer first book he points out the destructive legacy of those who hold to positions with unbending tenacity, particularly in mass movements. Hoffer said that rigid believers became unattractive representatives for their cause, alienating themselves from any civil discourse with those who differ with them. Their fanaticism becomes meaningful only to themselves and they commonly create antipathy toward the causes they espouse because of their rigidity.

Something like this is going on today in our text from the Gospel of Mark. The "true believers" are pestering Jesus because he and his followers do not scrupulously follow one of the defining marks of true belief -- the ceremonial washing of hands before eating. Because of this, they consigned Jesus and his mission to a dangerous heresy.

Years later, the Apostle Paul faced the same restrictive fanaticism as he took the Jesus faith out into the Gentile world. His true-believing opponents insisted the only way Gentiles could become Christians would mean affirming the Torah with all its written and oral forms of the law. This clash was so fierce that Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, exploded in some unusually impolite language about these true believers.

**The Role of Definitions of Religion**
Many pastors know of people coming to them and inquiring about the beliefs and practices of their tradition. "Pastor," they say, "I've been thinking of joining your church. But first I want to know what I must believe." The assumption behind this request is that religion centers on beliefs and practices, distinguishing them from other traditions.

We Pastors commonly invite these folks to learn a little about our church's approach to sacraments or the Bible. Certainly, each tradition has its particular theological convictions lying at the heart of its life and history. We humans are creatures of language and concepts. Our ability to put ideals, beliefs, hopes, and fears into language separates us from the rest of living creatures -- by degree, if not absolutely. So it is understandable that we try to shape our central religious concerns.

In the Hebrew Bible, there are three main attempts to join right language to religious conviction. One is the Law or Torah, combining doctrine and behavior. Some of the Torah was written down and embedded in our Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Other traditions developing out of the Law were passed on by memory. Religious teachers memorized these and handed down their summaries from generation to generation. In short, the Jewish Law, or Torah, is a magnificent work covering almost all the serious religious and personal behavior of God's people. It is said that the Torah was so comprehensive that if the Jews played baseball, the "infield fly rule" would be there.

Later, Christians also became concerned about theological doctrine. Early Christians struggled to put language around their doctrines of creation, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity. In the creeds, Christians borrowed language and concepts from Greek philosophy. Implicit in both the Torah and Christian doctrine is the conviction that these efforts defined true religious behavior. Anyone differing from these positions was an untrue believer.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the Middle Ages, Christians made similar attempts to put the faith into language. Thomas Aquinas merged Christian doctrine with the philosophy of Aristotle. John Calvin offered a massive statement of Christian faith inspiring the theological thinking of many of the Reformation churches. John Wesley provided a modified version of Calvin's theology informing the Methodist tradition, and William Ellery Channing gave those unhappy with nineteenth-century Calvinistic Puritanism, a modern-day Unitarianism.

Others have continued to give us rich and provocative versions of the faith. Walter Rauschenbush taught at Rochester Divinity School and his work influenced many around the world. Yes, he was Baptist, but some Baptists didn’t want to have much to do with him. You see, Rauschenbusch's view of Christianity was that its purpose was to spread a Kingdom of God, not through a fire and brimstone style of preaching but by leading a Christ like life. Rauschenbusch did not view Jesus' death as an act of substitutionary atonement but in his words, he died "to substitute love for selfishness as the basis of human society." He wrote that "Christianity is in its nature revolutionary" and tried to remind society of that. He explained that the Kingdom of God "is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven."

In Rauschenbusch's early adulthood, many Protestant churches were allied with the social and political establishment, in effect supporting the domination along with some who had become quite wealthy through their use of child labor. Many did not see a connection between an issue like this and ministry and did little to address human suffering. But Rauschenbusch saw it as his duty as a minister and student of Christ to act with love by trying to improve social conditions. Many were influenced by Rauschenbusch and your mission work here is evidence of that beginning with RAIHN and We’ve Got Your Backpack locally and stretching to rebuilding lives in New Orleans or Kenya.

We’ve had other influences, too like Karl Barth and his sturdy European neo-orthodoxy, H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr in America. Alfred North Whitehead, Hans Kung, and Walter Kaufman each rethought our faith in new ways. These have enriched us and made our Christian journey clearer even though each took their own distinctive path.

Unfortunately, we are tempted to turn the Torah, the early Christian creeds, and the theological offerings of succeeding centuries, into hard and unbending descriptions of the faith. With these we may consign anyone differing with us as dangerous and destructive. We can easily may become true believers, needing to reflect on Isaiah's insight so long ago,

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways,
And my thoughts than your thoughts.*-- Isaiah 55:8-9
**True Believers Can Create Unbelief**
A classic case of true believers causing religious doubt is that of Abraham Lincoln. Growing up on the impoverished Midwestern frontier, young Lincoln witnessed true-believer Christianity as mean-spirited denominations struggled for converts. Each claimed their take on Christian faith was the one and only correct one. This became distasteful to Lincoln so that in his adult years he never joined any church. However, he maintained a deep respect for Christian faith and often could usually be found in worship on Sunday mornings, especially during his presidency when he rented a pew annually at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. The pastor at the time, Rev. Gurley developed a relationship where the two of them frequently discussed theology and Rev. Gurley presided over the funeral of Lincoln’s son, Willy and then over Lincoln himself in 1865.

Lincoln's faith departed from the true believers of the Midwest as the Civil War dragged. Lincoln objected to all attempts by politicians and evangelical theologians to find the obvious hand of God in all the violence of that awful struggle. He was not certain America was a chosen nation, uniquely favored by God. He was uneasy about identifying the ways of God with the battlefield slaughter. None of the confident theology served up by the nation's leading Christians was acceptable to Lincoln's spirituality. Even though Lincoln held his Christian convictions to the end of his life, he found the prevailing orthodoxy of the day a temptation to unbelief. We could hope that Lincoln's doubts about the godly favoring of America, and his reluctance to think he saw clearly the workings of God in human affairs, could rain down on our contemporary politicians and religious leaders.

Today, some of us true belief folks are creating unbelief for our time. We sometimes drag out biblical passages to assault those who differ with us. When this happens the rigid belief of true believers creates unbelief among many who are different. Simultaneously we struggle when our own faith and motives are assaulted by those with little Christian conviction or compassion in an effort to assure themselves that sin really doesn’t matter. Rigidities lead to stand-offs. In the meantime, some rue that their self-righteousness has cut them off from people who might have found the saving grace of God, as they became involved in their fellowship.

So what can a person believe in today's world? Do we opt for minimalist theology, free of all pretensions claiming that all doctrines and ethical judgments are the perfect ways of God? Several of these approaches have been around for a long time.

We might consider the approach of the prophet Micah. In his minimalist statement he said what the Lord requires of us is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. We may spend the rest of our lives discovering what this curt statement means -- justice, kindness, and humility. We can pray, study, think, and ponder these things to our spiritual benefit, but we cannot mistake any of our ponderings for the absolute truth and will of God. Rather, we will need to re-think, revise, and refocus our conclusions as more understanding comes our way. These can never be frozen into true belief.

Another minimalist position allowing much diversity among believers, is the statement of Jesus so favored by Lincoln: We are to love God and neighbor as ourselves. We'll never know the full meaning of this love commandment. It will always exceed any attempt to freeze it into true belief statements.

For all his meticulous theology, the Apostle Paul did distill it pretty far when he said that one important thing for Christians is love.

Although we began by talking about codifying evil deeds and thinking about the intentions behind them it might be helpful to consider the roots of *good* deeds. For although (as Jesus said) *evil* intentions come from within, so do *good* intentions.

Intentions are worth considering for they are directly related to how we live in general, and how we live as God's people in particular. Next Sunday we will have communion and at this table we will say in our liturgy that the invitation is open to "All who intend a Christian life," which reminds us that our will is involved in Christian faith and practice. We can make a conscious choice to live according to our best understanding of God's way -- indeed, that's part of what conversion is about, and why it's sometimes called a *decision* for Christ. Part of receiving Christ involves adjusting our intentions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Of course, conversion is larger than that, for it also involves Christ's saving action on our behalf, and Christ’s inspiration of our will, but the adjustment of our *intentions* happens because of our decision to commit ourselves to Christ. What's more, for our intention to be effective, *it needs to be decided in a general way ahead of the specific situations where we intend our Christianity to show*. That is, if we wait for crisis moments to decide whether we will or will not behave in an ethically and morally responsible manner, there may be too much immediate pressure to promote clear thinking. But, if we've settled ahead of time our intention to be guided by the spirit of our faith, then it's more likely that, when a crisis moment comes, we'll react in keeping with our intention.

There are good reasons for the old saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." It can mean, for one thing, that our intentions were never connected to an action plan, or that something distracted us from following through. It can also mean that we made a good start, but then got sidetracked by a bad habit, by nonproductive behavior or by forgetting our resolves. This is one of the reasons people have Bible Study or pray together or do mission. This process helps us stay on track. In conversation with each other we sometimes see how some deeds are done for sane but self-serving reasons. Sometimes the conversation reminds us of lines from T. S. Eliot’s play, *Murder in the* *Cathedral* which say, “The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason.”

None of this is to suggest that we should avoid doing good deeds until we're sure our intentions are pure. From the point of view of the helped person, the deed is still a blessing. But in terms of our spiritual life, giving over our intentions as well as our actions to God's service is an important part of discipleship.

Psalm 24: 3-4a reads, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?  And who shall stand in his holy place?"
The answer: "Those who have clean hands and pure hearts . . ."

Does this mean that the Pharisees were right about pointing out that the disciples had not washed their hands or cups before eating? Well, the psalm is not simply about a matter of hygiene. And, it was not even about keeping traditions. Traditions and ceremonies are important. They remind us of our responsibilities. However, it bothered Jesus that the Pharisees could be such sticklers for their traditions and their ceremonies, but so blind to their responsibilities to other people.

Dirty hands do not make a dirty heart. From within, Jesus said, not from without. It is greed not grime, malice not money, deceit not dust, arrogance not alcohol that makes us unclean. Water will not wash away immorality. Religious rituals will not cleanse us from envy, slander, and arrogance. All these evils, Jesus said, come from inside and make a person "unclean."

Jesus is warning us not to prefer creeds to deeds. I like the story about Queen Victoria who was at a diplomatic reception in London. The guest of honor was an African chieftain. All went well during the meal, until, at the end, finger bowls were served. The guest of honor had never seen a British finger bowl, and no one had thought to brief him beforehand about its purpose. So he took the finger bowl in his two hands, lifted it to his mouth, and drank its contents--down to the very last drop!

For an instant there was breathless silence among the British upper crust and then they began to whisper to one another. All that stopped in the next instant as the Queen, Victoria, silently took her finger bowl in her two hands, lifted it, and drank its contents! A moment later 500 surprised British ladies and gentlemen simultaneously drank the contents of their own fingerbowls.

It was "against the rules" to drink from a fingerbowl, but on that particular evening Victoria changed the rules---because she was, after all, the Queen. It is "against the rules" not to wash your hands before you eat and on that the Pharisees called the hand of the disciples who follow Jesus. But Jesus recognizes their hypocrisy and he quotes from Isaiah, "These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me."

Our tradition should not kill our compassion.

The Lever soap company came out years ago with an advertising catchphrase that went like this: "Lever 2000 cleans all your 2,000 parts!"  Well, there's one place that even the best soap can't reach--it can't give you a clean heart.

Every generation draws its own lines concerning who is clean and unclean.  Years ago, following the regular Sunday service at a small Presbyterian church, a woman lingered near the back of the building. Obviously, she had some agenda. She confessed that her 18-year-old daughter had given birth to a child out of wedlock. She added reluctantly, "Well, it should be baptized, shouldn't it?"

The pastor said that he would discuss the matter with the board. After a lengthy debate, the board voted to approve the baptism. The baptism was set to take place the fourth Sunday in Advent. The church was full. This congregation had the custom of asking this question as part of the baptismal service: "Who will stand with this child?" At this point, friends, sponsors, and the family would stand up and remain standing during the remainder of the service.

 The pastor and elders were worried that no one but the young woman's mother would stand up with her. When the question was asked, it looked as if their worst fears were being realized. Then one man stood up. It was one of the elders, a man not known for his compassion or sentimentality. Then some of the other elders stood, followed by a young couple who had recently joined the church. Soon, a number of people were standing with the young mother. Tears of joy coursed down her cheeks. The scripture lesson read earlier in the service was from 1 John 4: "See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God . . . If we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us."

1. "The Depravity Standard." DepravityStandard.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rev. John T. Ball in a sermon, *Time for a Minimalist Faith*, published in *Sermons on the Gospel Readings; Series II, Cycle B.* It was published in *From Pulpit to Pew*, a weekly newsletter published by SermonSuite. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Edwards, Steven. "Measuring evil: Noted psychiatrist seeks tool to quantify wickedness." *Fox News*, November 30, 2014, FoxNews.com. Retrieved January 8, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)