

DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Read Matthew 22:34-40

In yesterday's sermon, I said that at the very heart of evil lies the denial of relationship. "You are not my God." "She is not my sister." "He is not my brother." "They are not our neighbors." Formalizing the thought into a definition, I would say that sin is the denial of our relationship with God and our relationships with each other.

The evils people do require that we deny relationship in order to do them. Aggressive evil (cruelty) and passive evil (indifference) alike require us to regard their victims as "other" and "less" than we are. They are not like us, not related to us in any positive way, not fully human, not with us in our shared humanity before God. The victim must be depersonalized so the evil, active or passive, can be inflicted.

In warfare, depersonalizing the enemy is standard practice. Those promoting the war label the soldiers of the enemy as things rather than human beings, so they can be seen as targets. Video games and cartoons accomplish this result by making the enemies "soulless": they may look human or nearly so but are really robots or monsters, and so killing them does not seem bad. When killed, the "bad guys" sometimes turn out to be hollow inside, or they just disappear. They are not real people.

If dehumanization and depersonalization were limited to video games and cartoons, we might not even be talking about them as a problem, let alone as the very heart of evil. In reality, however, every day brings more examples of disregard for the humanity of people and denial of relationship with them. Some of those examples are horrible: the sexual enslavement of young adults and children, torture, terrorism that blows up people without even caring who they are, and genocide. The examples of passive evil are terrible, also: disinterest in combating hunger or epidemic disease, lack of concern for the education of children not identified as "our children," refusal even to think about the people (mostly women and children) working in sweat shops around the world to keep our clothes and other consumer goods cheaper than they should be. To bring home the problems of depersonalization and dehumanization for profit and convenience, read Barbara Ehrenreich's book, *Nickel and Dimed: on (Not) Getting by in America*.

Jesus sums up all God wants from us so we can be genuinely human as God's people, and he does so in just two commands, both of which affirm relationship. In the sermon, I suggest reading the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) as affirmations of relationship with God and each other. The sermon, "Cultivating Life," is here: <http://home.earthlink.net/~rsind/sermon080504.htm>

The well-known emotion that expresses dehumanization and depersonalization is disgust. Victims are first made objects of disgust, scorn, contempt. Jesus reverses the process by reaching out to the people living in the shadows of others' scorn or indifference and affirming relationship.

What do you think? How much of the church's calling can be understood as affirming the relationships (with God and people) sin denies? How do we start? Do we not most often need to begin by affirming relationship with people before we can speak helpfully to them about God?