

Do not let evil defeat you

Romans 12:9-21, Jeremiah 15:15-21

September 3, 2017

Do not let evil defeat you.

Do you believe in a personal devil? I don't know. I don't know if I do or not, but I most definitely do not believe in anything like the caricatured devil of fable and popular culture, you know, some kind of hideous, sneering, leering red demon with horns and a trident.

No, a personal devil, a devil with particular form and personality, would be much more attractive, even beautiful, at least by worldly standards, beautiful and charismatic and supremely rational, much more subtle, much more insidious, much more dangerous.

I don't know whether or not I believe in such a devil, but the virtue of recognizing some kind of objectified evil outside ourselves is this: that evil is outside us, not born in us, not innate to us, not something we invented, not something "naturally" human, but something that tempts us, attacks us, attempts to undermine and distort and destroy what is human in us. That's frightening and intimidating, but it is also hopeful, because if evil is outside us, if evil is an enemy, it is an enemy that, with God's help, we may overcome. Do not let evil defeat you!

How can evil defeat you? In only one way. Evil has one single power: to change you to be like it, to remake you in its own image. Evil can only defeat you by persuading you to answer fire with fire, blow with blow, hate with hate, injury with revenge. Evil can only defeat you by persuading you to choose winning over love.

Do not let evil defeat you! Ruby Sales hasn't.

I met Ruby Sales for the first time two weeks ago somewhere between Cleveland and Cedar Falls. Lynne and I were on the road, making our way back to Iowa from Maine. I was driving and turned on the radio to help pass the hours. I tuned into NPR just in time to hear a rebroadcast of an interview with Ruby Sales done by Krista Tippett for her program, "On Being." Both of us, Lynne and I, were immediately captivated and enthralled by the interview. OK, I did not get too enthralled because I was driving! We were both deeply moved. Here was a special human being, wise and untainted by cultural prejudices and wholly formed by love.

If you are not acquainted with her, Ruby Sales is a civil rights activist and theologian, the founder and director of the SpiritHouse Project, described on its website as an "organization that uses the arts, research, education, action, and spirituality to bring diverse peoples together to work for racial, economic, and social justice, as well as for spiritual maturity."

Ruby Sales was born in 1948, in Alabama, into the heart of what she calls “Southern apartheid.” Was it anything else? Was it anything different than that -- apartheid? It was the wrong place and wrong time to grow up as a little black girl, only it wasn’t. Ruby Sales lauds the spiritual genius of her parents who, in the midst of the realities of that time and place, “created a world and a language where the notion that I was inadequate or inferior or less than never touched my consciousness.” She says “I grew up believing that I was a first class human being and a first class person,” which she is.

And she also acknowledges her debt to black folk religion, the faith birthed in the slaving fields, a faith that affirmed that “people who were considered property and disposable were essential in the eyes of God,” and a faith that empowered enslaved folk to overcome their enslavers by not letting themselves become like them, not returning hate for hate. Their prayers and their songs spoke of hope and of freedom and of love: “I love everybody, I love everybody, I love everybody in my heart.”

<http://www.firstcongucc.org/Media/I Love Everybody.mp3>

That’s a recording made by Pete Seeger on March 21, 1965, during the march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery in support of voting rights for Alabama’s black citizens. This was the third attempt at the march. Not quite two weeks earlier, the marchers were met at the Edmund Pettus Bridge by a phalanx of state troopers and deputies who attacked them and beat them. That day became known as “Bloody Sunday. Now, as they march once more, they are singing: “I love everybody. I love everybody. I love everybody in my heart.”

Ruby Sales was there. She marched, too. She was sixteen years old and this was her life.

Later that summer, she joined an organized protest against a whites-only store and was arrested along with a numbers of other protesters. They were jailed in Haynesville for six days, without air conditioning, showers, or toilets. Suddenly and unexpectedly, on August 20, they were released on their own recognizance. Several of them, including Ruby, walked across the street to a drug store to get something to drink, but were met there by a county deputy, Tom Coleman, who barred their way armed with a 12-gauge shotgun and a pistol. Coleman raised the shotgun and took aim at Ruby, but just before he fired, she was pushed out of the way by Jonathan Daniels, a fellow protester, a twenty-six-year-old white Episcopal divinity student, who took the full brunt of the shotgun blast and was killed instantly.

Ruby was utterly traumatized, left almost speechless for six months, but she, then a seventeen-year-old black girl, testified at Coleman’s trial. He was acquitted by the all-white jury.

“I love everybody. I love everybody. I love everybody in my heart.”

How? How can she sing that?

Ruby Sales did lose her faith for a time. She says it was after her first protest, when their group was surrounded by mounted state troopers who would not let them go to the bathroom. She says she knew they were on the side of justice, that it was good against evil, so she “kept looking up at the sky, waiting for the Exodus story to happen,” but it didn’t.

It was her Jeremiah moment ...

Remember me and help me. Let me have revenge on those who persecute me. Do not be so patient with them ... Remember that it is for your sake that I am insulted ...

Where are you God? I’m on your side, on the side of truth and justice, but you aren’t backing me up. I’m doing the right thing, but it’s not working.

Is that you? Feeling that doing the right thing doesn’t always work out? Feeling that loving your neighbor, in every instance, loving your enemies, in every instance, is impractical? Feeling that you need to give God a hand by taking matters into your own hands? Feeling that love and justice and restraint are nice in principle, but that reality demands a good offense and superior firepower and readiness to retaliate lest you be taken advantage of? That some times, in some cases, with some people, hate is justified?

How did the Lord answer Jeremiah? I will be with you. I will protect you. If you come back to me. If you proclaim my message. In other words: pray on, work on, teach on, sing on! When it isn’t working, don’t give up. Keep on keeping on. God will be there. Do not let evil defeat you, but conquer evil with good.

Ruby Sales did get her faith back, because it never really left her, because God never left her. She came to understand that it wasn’t just about winning, not just about overturning injustices, but about healing, healing people’s spirits, healing all the people’s spirits, black and white. She learned to ask: “Where does it hurt?”

Where does it hurt? There lies the root of her empathy for the Black Lives Matter movement, because it addresses the hurt, the sense that certain lives don’t matter, that certain lives are worth-less. But at the same time, despite her opposition to almost everything President Trump stands for, she understands that he is speaking to what few others are ready to speak to, the hurt and pain of the white majority who feel they are losing their status, their power, their privilege, people whose identity is wrapped up in a crumbling myth. There is, she says, a white spiritual crisis, a need to be healed, a need to be saved, a need to be given a new life, a new identity, an identity that can only bring healing when it becomes not about “I,” but about “we.”

“It’s a crisis of meaning,” she says.

I want a liberating white theology. I want a theology that speaks to Appalachia. I want a theology that begins to deepen people’s understanding about their capacity to live fully human lives and to touch

the goodness inside of them rather than call upon the part of themselves that is not relational. Because there's nothing wrong with being European American. That's not the problem. It's how you actualize that history and how you actualize that reality. It's almost like white people don't believe that other white people are worthy of being redeemed.

Where does it hurt?

When you ask that question of yourself, you can see more clearly the wounds in you that need to be healed, before you lash out. You love yourself.

And when you ask that question of your enemy, you can see more clearly the wounds in them. You love them.

Instead of demonizing them. "I've been deeply concerned," Ruby Sales says, "about [this whole business of demonization] because it does not locate the good in people. It gives up on people. And you can see [it] in the right and the left."

When you demonize somebody, you make the fatal move of bringing the evil that is outside in. Instead of challenging the demon that is threatening both of you, threatening all of us, threatening to destroy our very humanity, you put the demon in your neighbor, and thereby in yourself, and evil wins.

Do not let evil defeat you!

It cannot, it will not, if you cling to love. It cannot, it will not, if you cling to God. It cannot, it will not, if you refuse to conform yourself to the standards of this world, if you let God transform you by a complete change of your mind, if you fight evil, not with evil, but with good.