

Mark 9:38–50 (NRSV)

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

What about Evil?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 27, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Mark 9:42–50

At Christmas 1942 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a long letter to his family and those he was working with behind the scenes to overthrow Adolph Hitler. The letter marked ten years since Hitler had taken leadership of the Nazi Party. The war in Europe had been raging for four years. Austria and Poland had fallen years before. The death camps had been in full swing for eighteen months as Germany pursued what it called the final solution, the extermination of all people of Jewish descent from the earth. With macabre irony Hitler had begun to collect artifacts from Jewish homes and synagogues for a museum he planned which would display the relics of an annihilated people. Looking back over this decade of horror, Bonhoeffer wrote to his compatriots both trying to make sense of what had happened and to ask hard questions not only of the country as a whole but of themselves as well. “Are we still of any use?” he asked.

In the letter Bonhoeffer struck a theme that runs like a thread through his writings, how easily and willingly people are deluded or delude themselves.

At this juncture, looking back over a decade of delusion on the part of great segments of the German people, with palpable frustration he says the problem is stupidity. He says that stupidity is the greatest danger of all.

At first it sounds as though Bonhoeffer thinks his fellow Germans are idiots. He gets our attention with that idea. But then we find that he is using the word in a particular way. He says that stupid people are not unintelligent, far from it. “There are human beings who are of remarkably agile intellect yet stupid, and others who are intellectually quite dull yet anything but stupid,” he says.

So, what does he mean that the problem with so many of the German people is stupidity? Stupid people have preconceived ideas, he says. No facts which contradict the preconceived ideas need be entertained. The inconvenient facts are simply waved away as false. “Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears,” he says. “In all this the stupid person . . . is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack.”

Bonhoeffer realized that people become stupid for a very simple reason. Hitler gained power in Germany because he promised people an easy and certain fix to the effects of the loss of World War I, the great depression and any number of social or economic ills that plagued the country. If you read or hear Hitler’s speeches they are filled with religious language. He promised salvation from their woes, the resurrection of the German people. All the people had to do was give over their unquestioned loyalty and judgment to Hitler and all would be well. All they had to do was to become stupid, to cover their eyes to any inconvenient facts, and be righteously indignant and belittle anyone who dared contradict them. It turns out that Germany and large parts of the rest of the world could become stupid, could cover their eyes and either pretend it wasn’t happening or agree that it was a good thing, as six million Jews, two-thirds of the European Jewish population, were sent to death camps and exterminated.

This tragedy happened simply because leaders became stupid and demanded stupidity of their followers.

In the years since the Holocaust Hitler has become the emblem of evil incarnate. Need an example of the most evil person in the world? Hitler is usually trotted out. Sometimes a person will compare someone else to Hitler. What they're trying to say is that this person is off the charts evil. It's not a very useful thing to do. It's meant to be a trump card, but it's little more than name calling. Most often it simply means I disagree with you; I disagree with you absolutely. Therefore you are evil, like Hitler. The problem is this, it's mostly stupid people who do this, people who call others so dead wrong that they are evil, but who have no regard whatsoever for the facts. As Bonhoeffer noted, such people are enormously frustrating; living in their bubble they gloat, sure of themselves and self-satisfied.

It's not very useful to call someone Hitler, because it doesn't really say anything. But what we can usefully do is to try to unmask stupidity. It's hard. Stupidity is well-defended by its nature.

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." He wasn't one of us, they said. And Jesus says essentially, "Look, it doesn't matter whether he is following us; it matters what he is doing." Jesus wants his disciples to look at and judge by the facts of the situation. And then he went on to say, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."

Jesus didn't want his disciples to be stupid. Jesus doesn't want any of his disciples to be stupid now, either. Jesus wanted and wants his disciples to be discerning and trustworthy. To do otherwise is to be a stumbling block, to participate in and encourage stupidity, the blind adherence to a preconceived idea.

This last week the Pope addressed the U. S. Congress and took aim at among other things climate change. For him it was a religious issue about God's creation. But he relied, as most do, on overwhelming scientific evidence that humans are at least partially and probably largely at fault. Marsha Blackburn, who ranks second on the House Energy Committee, declared, in connection with the pope's address, "I don't think you will see me being persuaded." [Salon, Sept 26, 2015] This is the kind of stupidity that Bonhoeffer was concerned about.

Why doesn't Marsha Blackburn believe in climate change? Well that's complicated. She clearly has her mind made up. She has waved aside any evidence that doesn't support her preconceived point of view. In the face of facts she simply says, I don't believe them, as if they were matters of faith. She's certain, self-satisfied and completely invulnerable. Nope, I don't think you'll see me being persuaded, she says.

Why won't she listen to anyone? Edwin Rubin, a Professor of Law and Political Science at Vanderbilt hits it on the head, I think. He says, in a recent column, "The answer is actually simple: The reality of climate change demonstrates that progressives are right and [the right is] wrong. Not just wrong about the effect of human activity on the environment, but wrong about their basic approach to the problems of the modern world."

Rubin rightly notes, "People don't like to admit that they are wrong, however. Children stamp their feet or burst into tears. Adults concoct bizarre conspiracy theories (tens of thousands of scientists, from all over the world, have joined together to perpetrate a hoax), engage in outright denials in the face of overwhelming evidence (Marsha Blackburn says that someone – she won't say who — told her that the Earth is getting cooler) and insult anyone who tells them

something they don't want to hear (even if that person is the leader of a religion they've been touting as the truth for decades)."

People don't like to be wrong no matter what. But the stakes here are even bigger. For to admit the reality of climate change would be to admit the fact that the unfettered free market system is not salvation but is in fact at cause for large numbers of human and environmental problems. To give up stupidity and look at the facts would require facing the reality that an unregulated free market creates great damage in its wake. But those who benefit from the system, those for example who caused the great bank melt-downs of 2008 but who suffered hardly at all compared to millions of families and even churches who saw their investments and life savings dwindle, those who benefit so greatly from the system have a very high stake in propagating the kind of stupidity that preserves it. In the face of an arsenal of facts that contradict them they can sneer and say quite contemptuously, "You are wrong."

Think of the stupidity, the utter disregard for the facts one can hear all around us these days.

Homelessness and poverty are the result socialist leaning compassion that makes it too easy for people settle for handouts rather than earning their way. To use Paul Ryan's formulation, poor people are takers not makers. Stupidity.

Another. It is a denial of my religious freedom if I cannot discriminate against another person based on my religious beliefs. Didn't we put that one to bed when we stopped thinking it was alright to say that God was against mixing the races? Stupidity.

And on that theme, how about the assertion that God hates homosexuality and that the Bible is clear and forceful on that issue? Stupidity. The Bible is almost silent on the issue, and where it is mentioned it's catalogued with a lot of prohibitions like sewing two different kinds of cloth together.

And back to the topic we started with, Hitler's not all that far from successful attempt to exterminate the Jews. Holocaust deniers today say there is no evidence that any of it really ever happened. Stupidity.

There is nothing more stupid or dangerous than intelligent people who engage in willful, adamant and dishonest denial or distortion of facts that don't fit the way they wish to see reality. They seek to mislead their loyal followers. They put a stumbling block before them. They wreak havoc.

Time and again Jesus implores his followers to hold fast to what is real not what they wish were real. Time and again he unmaskes the leaders of his time who twist the facts to suit them. Time and again he tells his followers not to fall prey to such stupidity but instead to be the salt of the earth. He begs them to see clearly and in doing so season the world with honesty and truth. He begs us, too. For you are the salt of the earth, O people, salt for the reign of God. Amen.