

## ALL TOO HUMAN

A sermon by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
February 26, 2017

Please allow me to introduce myself  
I'm a man of wealth and taste  
I've been around for a long, long year  
Stole many a man's soul and faith

Pleased to meet you  
Hope you guess my name  
But what's puzzling you  
Is the nature of my game

In case these lyrics are not a familiar part of your musical repertoire, they come from a song titled "Sympathy for the Devil" by the Rolling Stones. Sung with appropriate irony and defiance by Mick Jagger, the song chronicles Lucifer's greatest hits throughout human history: religious wars and world wars, assassinations and betrayals and genocide.

Pleased to meet you  
Hope you guess my name  
But what's puzzling you  
Is the nature of my game

All too often, history does seem like a game of sorts, a cosmic contest between good and evil, between God and Satan, between the good guys and the bad guys. Which side is which depends upon your perspective, of course. But under no circumstances should, for example, falsehoods and other alternative facts be seen as the moral equivalent of the truth. Nor should favoring the few and oppressing the many be seen as the moral equivalent of justice. For my part, I'm confident that the values we champion as Unitarian Universalists put us on the side of goodness, truth, and justice. Even so, my concern this morning is that our pursuit of righteousness can all too easily become a demonstration of self-righteousness, especially when we feel morally outraged, as many of us now do.

Let's look at how the divide between good and evil developed in the first place, especially in the West. The historian of religion Elaine Pagels observes in her book, *The Origin of Satan* that the Christian tradition emerged within an environment of vicious sectarian strife. The earliest members of the Jesus movement saw themselves as the true

remnant of Israel, and they branded all others as agents of the forces of darkness. This distinction between the chosen ones and everybody else quickly became, in the siege mentality of the times, a sharp division between the Christians as good and others as bad, even evil. Thus began what Pagels calls “the demonization of the other” that was to have such catastrophic consequences in Western history.

It’s a simple scenario: those who agree with me are the good guys, and those who disagree with me are the bad guys. To rephrase the lingo of a past American administration, what makes an empire evil is, in part, simply that it is not mine. The nature of the game is that to be different is to be demonic.

Near the end of the song “Sympathy for the Devil,” Lucifer’s recurring question becomes almost a taunt: “What’s my name, what’s my name, can you guess my name?” In other words, who is responsible for all the evil that has been done in this world? The answer is almost hidden beneath the searing guitar work of Keith Richards. But it’s there. “I tell you one time,” Lucifer says, “you’re to blame.”

There is no Satan central, either in this world or beyond it. The evil that men and women do is done by men and women — not by cosmic powers or conflicting doctrines or by competing ideologies. It’s done by people just like you and me, and sometimes by you and me.

Our tendency is to deny this reality. We look around at all that’s wrong with the world and see only the destructive actions of others, not our own complicity. We see the bad things others have done but not the good things we have left undone. We observe the hatred and bigotry expressed by others but fail to acknowledge our own prejudices and biases.

I’ve been especially bothered by this tendency over the past several months. Make no mistake: I’m deeply angry about the direction our nation has taken. I’m especially angry at the callous indifference our president has shown to the lives of Americans and would-be Americans who are the most vulnerable and the most in need of our kindness and compassion.

Even so, I find myself bothered by attitudes on both sides of the divide. Our Unitarian Universalist faith is founded on the belief that every human being deserves to be treated with dignity, not just people we agree with. Everyone should be treated fairly, not just people we like. Everyone should be encircled by our care and concern, not just people whose company we enjoy. Unless we have acknowledged and addressed the defects in our own lives, Jesus once said, we have no right to point out the defects in the lives of others.

Here’s the question for us this morning: do our deepest feelings and desires meet the standards we set for other people? Do our motivations pass moral muster? What if the people around us knew what we actually thought and how we actually felt? Would they view us as virtuously as we view ourselves?

In Douglas Richards’ novel titled *Mind’s Eye*, a brilliant but evil scientist named Kelvin Gray develops a plan to give certain people direct access to the internet by

implanting electrodes in their brains. This real-time and covert capability would give a huge competitive advantage, for example, to business people negotiating deals, or soldiers in battle, or lawyers in a courtroom, or students in school. In order to execute his plan, Gray kidnaps 27 people and begins experimenting with web-enabled surgical implants. The first 26 implant surgeries fail, and the subjects either die or Gray has them killed.

The 27<sup>th</sup> and final try, performed on an oceanographer named Nick Hall, turns out to be successful. As it happens, along with the ability to read the entire internet through his mind's eye, Nick also develops ESP – extra-sensory perception. He can read the innermost thoughts and feelings of every person around him within several miles.

Nick uses his new capabilities to escape from Kelvin Gray's henchmen, teaming up with a woman named Megan, who conveniently also has the ability to communicate with Nick by ESP. Over dinner one night while on the run, they discuss Nick's new powers and the vast economic benefit its malevolent use could bring to Gray if Nick gets recaptured. But they also discuss whether it would be good for everyone to have ESP.

Nick says to Megan, "Our history is riddled with brutality, wars, violence, and the like. We all know that. But I've been forced to overhear thousands of people's thoughts since I awoke in that dumpster yesterday. And they aren't pretty. I haven't mentioned this to you, but people think the nastiest things pretty routinely. Even friends."

Nick continues, "And I'm not talking about just being able to read each other's surface thoughts, which would be bad enough, but being able to read each other's innermost thoughts. People wishing other people were dead. Wives learning what their husbands are really thinking about when they're pretending to be listening to them, and vice versa. Subordinates who despise their bosses. Coworkers who badmouth colleagues behind their backs. Kids learning what their parents really think about their fifth grade art projects, and their general criticisms and disappointments. And revealed prejudices, even among the best and most open-minded of us. Not necessarily just against blacks, or whites, or Asians, or homosexuals, or Arabs. But against the obese. Rednecks. Snobs."

"It's an awfully bleak picture," Megan responds. "I guess our species just isn't wired for full disclosure."

They both fall silent for a few minutes, and then Nick says: "I should probably mention that it isn't like the species is beyond redemption. It goes without saying that I've read a lot of positive thoughts and emotions as well. Selflessness. People going out of their way to please, or help, or surprise each other. Devotion to kids or parents. Generosity and compassion. Some of it is faked for outsiders, but a lot of it is real."

Megan asks, "So do positive thoughts outweigh venomous thoughts?"

Hall laughs and says, "I haven't really done that experiment. And most thoughts are neutral. You know, like, 'I wonder if it will rain tomorrow?' But regardless of the good will that would come from reading each other's positive thoughts, nothing could mitigate the total disaster that mind reading would cause."

Megan agrees. She adds, “My guess is that if everyone could read minds the way you do, society would tear itself to pieces in hours. Probably with our bare hands and teeth.”

The Australian band INXS once wrote a popular anthem titled, “The Devil Inside” that captures this dynamic precisely. The words of the song read, in part:

Look at the faces  
Listen to the bells  
It’s hard to believe  
We need a place called hell

The devil inside  
The devil inside  
Every single one of us  
The devil inside

Words are weapons  
Sharper than knives  
Every single one of us  
The devil inside

Every single one of us. To paraphrase Megan, none of us is wired for full disclosure. Does this mean we can’t confront evil until we are pure in heart ourselves? Not at all. If that were the case, no one could ever do God’s work in this world. Rather, it means that we must recognize what we have in common with those we oppose – as well as the ways we are different.

I’m reminded of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was born into a prominent Berlin family in 1906. His eldest brother was killed in the First World War, a humiliating defeat for Germany that plunged the nation into despair and chaos, and prepared the way for the rise of militant National Socialism under Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer came to Union Seminary here in New York to study ethics with Reinhold Niebuhr and learn about Gandhi’s approach to nonviolent resistance.

As Hitler’s vendetta against the Jews became more pronounced, Bonhoeffer, though a staunch pacifist, became convinced that passive resistance was insufficient. Bonhoeffer eventually joined a conspiracy against Hitler — a conspiracy that failed, for which he would be imprisoned and eventually executed. Along the way, Bonhoeffer insisted on keeping not only the shortcomings of his adversaries in view, but also his own. He wrote, “We have been silent witnesses of many evil deeds. We have been drenched by many storms. We have learned the art of equivocation and pretense. Are we still of any use?”

What was true of Bonhoeffer in his day is true of us in our day: we need to be of use. But, also like Bonhoeffer, we need to ensure that we don't allow our adversaries to remake us in their own image.

In his volume of aphorisms titled *Human, All-Too-Human*, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche writes, "People who will not master their irritability, their venomous and vengeful feelings, and their lust, and attempt to become master in anything else, are as stupid as the farmer who lays out a field beside a torrent without guarding against that torrent." He later adds: "We always stand a few paces too near ourselves and a few paces too far from our neighbor."

Truth be told, we stand closer than we think to people whom we may deem enemies or adversaries. Our lives are not ready for full disclosure either. Even so, humbled by our own weaknesses and aware of our own shortcomings, we venture out into this tragically broken yet ineffably beautiful world and put ourselves to use.

Put more simply, it's getting ugly out there, but don't you get ugly too.

Challenge whatever sayings are false and confront whatever structures are unjust, but stay true to your commitments. Protest whatever is wrong and challenge whomever is unfair, but maintain your integrity.

We are God's people, and we have been called to do good work. We may be flawed, but we will be faithful to our calling. We will be of use.