

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Wicked”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

5th Sunday of Easter

May 2, 2010

Jer. 17:7–8; Ps. 1; Eph. 6:10–20; Lk. 11:37–41

Gracious God, once again, we come seeking a word for our lives, for our community, for our world. We come seeking a word we cannot speak to ourselves, a word from beyond us, and a word that only you can reveal to us. We thank you that in Jesus Christ you’ve come among us, revealing your love, your justice, and your mercy. Open our hearts to hear and believe the Good News that exceeds anything we would ever have thought. Let your Word be a light to our path and a lamp to our way that we may continue to walk faithfully with Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On Monday, in a packed Watts-Hill Hall, Barbara Brown Taylor spoke with clergy and other folk who had gathered about words that make God real, words we use in the church. She told us about an exercise she does with her students. She asked them to close their eyes and to think what comes to mind when they hear the word “God.” As you can imagine, their responses were all over the place. Then she asked them to do the same for the words “grace” and “sin” and “salvation.”

She then said that every year, a large number of languages on this planet atrophy or become extinct. They go out of existence. They are no longer working languages. When does a language cease to be a working language? When the children no longer learn to use it.

I bring this up this morning because in a few moments, we are going to baptize Ellie Everett. All of you who are members of this congregation will take a vow to work with Sherry and Luke and her grandparents, her aunts and uncles, the whole family, as an extended community, to raise her in the community of faith. It raises an interesting question: what words should we teach her in order that she can live as a child of God? So she can live as one who is claimed as a covenant member with Christ, the follower of Jesus Christ? What words will help her understand and speak and live as a child of God? Is it “grace”, “love”, “salvation?”

One word that came to mind for me this week, and you’ll understand it right away, was the word “wicked.” Would that appear on your list? Probably not. It is a word that has atrophied in our culture. We don’t use it much. Jesus used it often, as you heard in the Gospel Lesson this morning. It appears throughout Scripture. “Blessed are those who are righteous. They are not like the wicked.” It has atrophied in our day—except for the Broadway musical title which is currently having a very successful run in downtown Durham.

Just so you know the truth, I went to see *Wicked* yesterday with my family. It is a gripping show. It makes an important point amongst several points, that what appears to be ‘wicked’ isn’t necessarily so. Appearance does not always match up with reality.

When we talk about the word ‘wicked’, what is going on here? Am I trying to impress you with my relevance, that I do know what’s going on in Durham? Probably there is some of that. I must admit that I have been fascinated with the word “wicked” for a long time. As I said earlier, it is a word that was used often in the Bible, but yet, it is not used much in our vocabularies.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of wicked is: bad in moral character, disposition, or conduct. In other words, it is not just something that is wrong or evil or bad, but there is a disposition towards this evil wrongdoing, a disposition towards practicing evil towards others and towards God.

I know you will tell me that wicked can also be used in a positive sense. When you see something that is beautiful but outrageous, you’ll say, “Oh, that’s wicked!”

Is this a diversion or is there a point to be made here as we get ready to participate in a baptism? In a few moments, we will ask Sherry and Luke, “Do you renounce evil?” That seems strange, doesn’t it, to ask a couple about to have their daughter baptized, “Do you renounce evil?”

Pick up the newspaper any day—every day—watch the news, count the stories of people who have a disposition to do things that are harmful to others. There is a sense of wickedness in the world. Do I need to bring up the Goldman Sachs hearings this week? They encouraged people to invest their money in mortgages that they were going to bet against because they thought they were going to fail? I don’t know the whole story, but that sounds wicked to me.

To get closer to home: if you go to see *Wicked*, you would go to the Durham Performing Arts Center. There is a magnificent building right across the street from the DPAC. Someone visiting Durham asked, “What is that huge white building?” I replied, “That is our new state-of-the-art jail. That’s where we put a lot of our young people who can’t read and write.” As you know, we’re cutting the budgets of our schools in Durham and in Wake County, changing the commitment to diversity in a way which will hurt low-income students.

This week, Jane Wettach helped me to see what she describes as “a pipeline from schools to prisons to jails.” There is something wicked about that. And if you are in the community of faith, you need to understand when wickedness is going on. There is a disposition that says, “Well, those things just happen.” Friends, it’s been happening for as long as I’ve been in this community. The poverty rate for children in our community has been about 20%, and those students are in the low-performing schools. Their chances to success are low.

Wickedness exists. We in the community of faith have a word to use for it. You may choose another word. But the point of the faith community is that we need to give our children grounding so, as the Psalmist says, they will have roots that go down deep into the ground that can nourish them. They will not be like the wicked who go from here to there to try to find out what’s most profitable.

Use your imagination for a moment. One thing that I can imagine Ellie will do as she grows up is to play “dress up.” How many of you have put on adult clothes? For girls, it was fancy women’s outfits. For boys, there were cowboy outfits or uniforms with the numbers of sports stars on them.

The letter to the Colossians says when you clothe yourself, you put on “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col. 3:12). Those are words we could teach our children, what it means to be compassionate, to reach out to those in need. But above all, when you dress up, you put on love.

Barbara Brown Taylor told us that love is one of the most difficult words in our faith community’s vocabulary because you use the same word to say how you feel about ice cream as well to say how you feel about God. Because we have come to know God through Jesus Christ, the love we will teach Ellie and the other children about is the love that reaches out to others, that seeks the good of the other, love that is willing to make a sacrifice on behalf of the other. And that’s the reality that can ground us for living full and faithful lives.

Along with asking Sherry and Luke if they renounce evil, I’m going to ask them if they affirm their reliance on God’s grace. With the wickedness in the world, God has not left us defenseless. God does not leave us without resources. We are encouraged to dress up with compassion, justice, peace, and love, and to learn these words. Not only to learn the words, but to be exposed to the realities they represent. Compassion is served well when you hand a cup of soup to a hungry person at the soup kitchen or when you hammer nails into a Habitat home or when you visit someone who is sick. Then these words become enfolded. They become realities that can help us make our way in a world where there is wickedness.

One of my favorite stories that captures this for me is a story I may have shared with you before, but it bears repeating. It comes from Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies*. She tells about a young girl who lived in an urban center. She walked home from school every day. One day, she got disoriented and she could not find her way home. She became desperate and a policeman was riding down the street in his squad car, and he saw her, and he pulled over and said, “Young lady, may I help you?” She started crying and said, “I’m lost. I can’t find my way. I’m scared.”

He said, “I’ll tell you what you do. You come sit in this squad car here with me, and we’ll ride around a few blocks until we find something that’s familiar to you. And when we do, you tell me.” She said that sounded like a good idea so she got in the squad car. Rather than feeling afraid, she felt secure riding around with a policeman in a squad car. They rode around several blocks and finally she shouted, “There! There! Over there! That’s my church! Let me off at my church. I can always find my way home from there.”¹

Clothe us with love, O God, so that we could live as faithful disciples and raise up other generations of faithful disciples so that we can serve our living, risen Lord. Amen.

¹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. New York: Anchor Books, 1999, p. 55.