

When Good People Do Nothing

Matthew 12:22-32

sermon digest

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In contrast with the 1950's "age of anxiety" and the 1960's "age of upheaval," Martin Marty observed a national trend toward indifference in the 1970's, which he called "the age of melancholy." The spirit of the times was best identified by graffiti on the walls and lapel button philosophy: "Nostalgia isn't what it used to be." "I am neither for nor against apathy." "Due to a lack of interest, tomorrow has been cancelled." He joked that a radio call-in show announced the topic of the day was to be "apathy"; no one called. (Marty, *The Fire We Can Light*, pp 29-30.)

Apathy is the passive side of evil. The demonic presence of evil is real even if we do not believe in supernatural beings dedicated to human misery. In the discussion of evil and human suffering, we usually focus on deliberate, premeditated actions and events that illustrate measurable evidence of evil in our world. Some of us are moved to question the permissive will of God that seems to allow bad people and destructive acts of nature to rage on the face of the earth. Assuming an all-powerful God, we also assume a divine gate-keeper who gives a free pass to criminal behavior, to natural disaster, and to political tyranny. The challenge to God is fair and ought to be raised. God is not likely to be destroyed by our questioning. However, we should not stop with a challenge to the permissive will of God. We need to take the questions home with us and sleep on them. What about the permissive human environment that provides space for evil to flourish? These days we call it "passive-aggressive" behavior. It is not about covert acts of willful evil, but much more subtle acts of irresponsible negligence toward our family or workmates that carries overtones of intentional harm.

Perhaps you recall the outrageous *New York Times* story about the murder of Kitty Genovese in Queens, NY in March, 1964. The young woman was attacked on the street in a densely populated area. Evidently her screams for help threatened the assailant and caused him to leave the scene. When no one responded to the calls for help, the assailant returned to continue his attack and silence his victim. Still no one came, so he returned a third time and sexually assaulted her dead body. According to the report, some thirty-eight residents heard and ignored the cries for help. The night was cold and people did not want to open their windows. Besides, the first rule in large metropolitan communities is, "mind your own business." The most common comment from the witnesses was, "We didn't want to get involved."

The article set off a wave of national soul-searching. Was this an isolated incident, or does it speak to a larger social problem? Have we grown so deaf and blind to the pain of our neighbors that we can no longer open a window or pick up a phone, or is this just another case of human nature? We were haunted by the oft-quoted line from the 18th century Irish philosopher Edmund Burke, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

German town folk living within sight and sound of the Nazi death camps claimed ignorance of the facts of the Jewish Holocaust in spite of the daily cattle trains of human cargo, tons of used clothing going into East Germany, horrible smells from the cremation ovens, and a daily parade of emaciated inmates going out into the factories and countryside to work. When US troops liberated the camps, they forced citizens to witness the conditions and bury the piles of dead bodies. David H. Jones analyzed this strange conspiracy of silence about the extermination of the Jews in Germany in *Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust: A Study in the Ethics of Character*. Jones wrote:

People who were bystanders at the time when the evidence became available to them should have begun to have some concern about the fate of the Jews. They were in a preliminary stage of awareness and possible reflection 'before the fact,' not yet having considered whether there was any problem that should concern them. Many people in that situation could have been motivated to evade full self-acknowledgment of J [the extermination] simply by a vague fear of being drawn into something that they regarded as being none of their business or by an aversion to doing anything that might possibly be inconvenient or slightly risky. (p. 83).

Martin Niemöller was a decorated German U-boat captain during World War I and an early supporter of Adolf Hitler. Toward the end of the war he entered the ministry and as a pastor supported the antisemitic policy of the Nazis. He finally reacted to Hitler's "Aryan Paragraph" as a contradiction to Christian charity, joined the confessional church, and spent the war years in the death camps and barely escaped execution. After the war he helped to initiate the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt and became an outspoken anti-war pacifist. His best-known legacy was a confessional poem describing the course of apathy.

In Germany, they came first for the
Communists,
And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist;
And then they came for the trade unionists,
And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist;
And then they came for the Jews,
And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew;
And then . . . they came for me . . .
And by that time there was no one left to speak up.

We are more comfortable in accusing the Germans than we are in examining our own behavior. Antisemitism was also a strong sentiment in Russia and the US during the rise of Hitler. President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" was labeled the "Jew Deal" by those who ridiculed his appointment of Jewish advisers. His critics have noted a strange national silence about the treatment of Jews in Germany and numerous attempts to distance himself from the charges of complicity with Jews.

Personal and community responsibility is the alternative to apathy. Given the clear symbol of evil represented in the cross of Christ, we have little difficulty in focusing on the Roman killing machine of the time, the petty resentment of the Sanhedrin, or the violence of the mob shouting for death. Christian antisemitism has always focused on Good Friday as the opportunity to blame the Jews. Obviously, the Gospels lend credibility to the accusation, but we need to enlarge the scope of the question of guilt. Before the arrest and trial and the beating and crucifixion of Jesus, the Synoptic Gospels take a detour through Gethsemane. Between the Passover table and the arrest of Jesus, Gethsemane contains a confessional element that implicates the passive insensitivity of disciples. Susan Garrett ("Disciples on Trial," *Christian Century*, Ap. 15, 1998, pp. 396-99) examines the base material in Mark and concludes that the disciples were on trial here. Given the fact that the event is critical of the leaders of the early church, how did the account of Gethsemane survive the early censors? The Fourth Gospel skips it altogether and even offers a refutation of any struggle on the part of Jesus. Early church Fathers danced around the humanity of Jesus generally preferring the high Christology of John to the human agony of Jesus in the Garden. Gethsemane presents Jesus as uncertain about the cross, fearful of the pain, and reluctant before the hatred of the moment, but it also exposes the disciples as insensitive and apathetic, perhaps in denial. If the Gospels indict the Jews, they also include the disciples.

Garrett believes that the humanity of the disciples was encouraging to the early church. If great men like Peter, James, and John failed under pressure, then there was hope for ordinary folks like us. The story also magnified the power of divine grace. Before the resurrection of Christ, none of the disciples either comprehended or was fully willing to follow the way of Christ. They were examples of the "Amazing Grace" of God: "I once was lost but now am found, 'twas blind but now I see."

The degree of failure might have also been subject to question. After all, one of the disciples (according to John, it was Peter) drew the sword to defend Jesus from arrest. So, when they did step up in active defense of their Lord, he ordered them to put away the sword and suggested that the cross was inevitable, maybe even an act of God. Why shouldn't they sleep as Jesus prayed? He seemed perfectly willing to stand alone, and fate seemed to be dictating the order of events.

John Killinger notes an ancient tradition concerning the Seder: The meal was to last until the first person fell asleep. Killinger views the sleeping disciples not as abandoning Jesus so much as bringing the Passover celebration to an end. Sleep is the body's response to exhaustion, but it can also imply boredom, indifference, apathy. Jesus had warned, "You will all become deserters because of me this night." Peter insisted, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." We know the rest of the story.

Without question, the story of Gethsemane is a self-critical statement of the early disciples. No, they were not guilty of the hypocritical kiss of betrayal. They did not stand in the court and shout "Crucify him!" They did not wash their hands before the crowd like Pilate, sling the whip or drive the nails like the Roman soldiers. But they did fall asleep in the crisis, and they could not forget their flight after the arrest and Peter's denial to the servant girl. The disciples could never get past their role as passive observers to the evil of the cross.

So what? Obviously they could not stop the rolling train of fate. What is one sword before the onslaught of the Sanhedrin guard or before the military might of Rome? But when they looked back over the development of events, at least three of the disciples acknowledged: we might have stayed awake; we might have prayed with him and walked with him.

As we hold God responsible for the evil that is allowed to flourish in this world, let us be sure that we are acting in responsible ways. At the foundation, sin is irresponsible behavior. It is not only the destructive act, but the failure to act. It is a condition of insensitivity to the need of our brother and sister.