

Title: Turning a Blind Eye

Text: Mark 10: 46 – 52

Date: October 28, 2018

I will be talking about today's text eventually. A little. Towards the end.

First, I have something a little more ambitious in mind: an overview evil. I bet if you knew that in advance, most of you would have invited your friends to join you today. Right?

More specifically, I'll be framing my thoughts around the teaching of Dom Hélder Câmara, who was a Brazilian Roman Catholic Archbishop serving from 1964 to 1985, during the military regime of the country. He was an advocate of liberation theology, and he was quoted as having said, **"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."**

Now to be fair, much of what I know about him I learned from Richard Rohr. Unfortunately there is no book I can point you towards, since it mostly came from a lecture Richard Rohr gave that was inspired by a short tract Dom Câmara wrote in 1971 entitled *The Spiral of Violence*. He claimed that there was a spiral of violence, spiraling from the bottom up.

I felt inspired to reflect on this today for two reasons. Partially because I think most of us have an overly narrow understanding of the nature of sin and evil. But more so because much of what I see in the newspapers these days – from pipe bombs, to verbally assaulting people in public, to dismembering people in consulates, to attacks on synagogues - seems to be painting a picture of the *Spiral of Violence* described by Dom Câmara.

Traditional Catholic moral teaching said there were three sources of evil: "the world," "the flesh," and "the devil." Bear with me now, because each of these terms will need some defining in ways we are not used to.

When we speak of the bottom level – "the world" – this refers to the systemic evil that lies at the root of most cultures and is seen in how they relate to power, prestige, and possessions.

The middle level – what Paul refers to as "the flesh" – refers to the personal evil and the bad choices of individuals: personal mistakes, and individual naughtiness. (I might add here that I think Paul's choice of the term "the flesh" is particularly unfortunate and misleading.) When we point our finger at this second level of the spiral of violence – blaming individuals, making people feel guilty because they are bad – we are mostly wasting our time, unless we also critique the other two as well. It is one thing to "out" the individual corporate sex offender; and it is another thing entirely to shine a light on the culture that produces and coddles corporate sex offenders. History will never change by a one-shot-at-a-time approach. The underlying agreements are still in place.

The top level, "the devil," expresses itself as evil disguised as good, essentially to enforce the lower two levels. This can be seen in unjust legal and tax systems, in devotion to laws of market economy, and commitment to the military-industrial complex. At this high level evil always disguises itself as good, is charming, on your

side, and virtuous. Satan (like Citibank) must present himself as too big or too needed to ever fail or be wrong. "The devil's" secret is camouflage. "The devil's" job is to look very moral. It has to look like we are defending some great purpose or cause . . . like making the world safe for democracy, or keeping bad people off the streets. *Then* you can do many evils without any guilt, without any shame or self-doubt, and actually with a sense of high-minded virtue. Until Christians start understanding this, their capacity for "discernment of spirits" (I Cor. 12:10) remains very minimal.

Up to now in human history most people's moral thinking has been overwhelmingly oriented around the personal evils of "the flesh." There was not too much knowledge of the foundations of evil in cultural assumptions themselves, and hardly any critique of major social institutions on a broad level until the 1960s. The individual person got all the blame and punishment for evil, while the supportive world views, and violent institutions, were never called into account or punishment, as Jesus did when he critiqued the Temple system itself. Too often the church focused on personal "sins" like cheating on a test, or foolin' around with your date in the backseat of the car. We guilting young people into taking "purity pledges," while failing to look critically at the broader systems that we were a part of.

The biblical prophets of Judaism were the unique and inspired group who exposed all three sources of evil. It is why they have been largely ignored. They didn't concentrate on "the flesh," but largely on "the world," and what we described a moment ago as "the devil," which very often passes as good and necessary evil.

Richard Rohr claims that one of the great favors John Paul II did was to introduce into Catholic theology the terms "structural evil," "institutionalized sin," and "corporate evil," recognizing that this was the primary way that the biblical prophets spoke. Over 90% of the condemnations of the Old Testament prophets were of Israel itself, of wars, alliances, corrupt business practices, and a greedy priesthood in the Temple. They first *named* systematic evil, and then they hoped the individual person would repent, and then "the devil" would have little chance of taking over because the hidden evil had been exposed. Evil must be nipped in the bud, or it is always too late.

If you are blind to evil on the level of what Richard Rohr calls "the world," then "the flesh" and "the devil" are inevitable consequences. Today's message is a call to really *see* this, and to no longer turn a blind eye. Without seeing this, things will continue out of control, and we won't understand why we are just going from putting out one brush fire after another. "The world" is the most hidden, the most disguised, the most denied level of evil. It's the way cultures, groups, institutions, and nations organize themselves to survive. It is why racism is so hard to see when you grow up in the system.

It is not wrong to survive, but for some reason *group* egocentricity is never seen as evil, when you have only concentrated on *individual* egocentricity (the flesh.) That is how our attention has been diverted from the spiral of violence. "The devil" then stands for all of the ways we legitimate, enforce, and justify our group egocentricity, such as idolization of wealth, power, and fanfare.

Once any social system exists, it has to maintain and assert itself at all costs. This is true in governments, as well as in most religious institutions. Things we do inside that system are no longer seen as evil because everyone else is doing it. That's why leaders

in Saudi Arabia and Russia can feel justified in carrying out secret executions. That's why President Bashar al-Assad can feel justified in bombing his own people. That's why North Koreans can march in lockstep to a tyrant, and why so many Americans are passionate about walling out those desperately seeking asylum. That is why intentionally distributing fake news can be seen as defensible. When it is all about maintaining your system at all costs, it is nearly impossible to perceive broader moral connections. You can see now why most evil is hidden and denied, and why Jesus said, **"Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."** (Luke 23:34) They really don't. Do we?

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In our text today Bartimaeus was a beggar who unquestionably knew he was blind. He shouted out and said, **"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"** Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, **"Son of David, have mercy on me!"** Jesus restored his sight saying, **"Go. Your faith has made you well."**

Most of us are so much a part of the cultures that produced us that it is hard for us to see the ways in which "evil" has disguised itself as an angel of light. My prayer today is that we might cry out to the Beloved for our sight to be restored – that we may no longer turn a blind eye. This is not an easy ask.

Dom Câmara had essentially given up on the older generation, believing that the elders had become addicted to this escalating spiral. He directed his appeal primarily to the youth of the world to break out of this spiral of violence. I would rather not give up on anybody.

Our closing hymn is "Open My Eyes, That I May See." (# 451) I had some mixed feelings about the choosing this hymn because I find the tune to be a little saccharine. I am, however, moved by the words.

Open my eyes that I may see
glimpses of truth thou hast for me.
Place in my hands the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.

May we no longer be blind to the reality of institutionalized sin. May we no longer be blind to the ways in which we have been shaped by a culture that is less than innocent, and has become addicted to its ways. May we be set free to speak with the clarity of the prophets.

Amen.

Mark 10: 46 – 52 *The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus*

"They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. "When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, **"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"** "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, **"Son of David, have mercy on me!"** "Jesus stood still and said, **"Call him here."** And they called the blind man, saying to him, **"Take heart; get up, he is calling you."**

⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, **“What do you want me to do for you?”** The blind man said to him, **“My teacher, let me see again.”** ⁵²Jesus said to him, **“Go; your faith has made you well.”** Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.