

Preacher, writer, and former bishop in the Methodist Church Will Willimon recently talked about a friend of his who recognized what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel about evil and how it comes not from outside sources but from within. His friend, Willimon said, is a minister who is white, male, and passionate about ending systemic racism in our country. This passion fueled a ministry that partners with Black churches in the same city where his parish is. This ministry is hailed as a success and his friend couldn't help but be proud of it. He wants so badly to make a difference.

He never thought of himself as racist. How could he be? He had started a large, successful ministry with the Black churches in his city.

That perception was challenged when he and his family were in a different city attending an event that let out late at night. As he and his family were walking to their car, he noticed on the street corner ahead of them a group of three young Black men standing around talking and laughing. Without hardly noticing what he was doing, Willimon's friend reached out and pulled his young children closer to him as they approached the corner and he avoided eye contact with the Black men.

Willimon's friend may not have noticed his actions, but one of the Black men did. And this Black man called out in a friendly voice, (not unlike how I often greet passersby on the first day of classes), "Hi there, how are you all doing tonight? Hope you enjoy the city and be careful."

It was at that moment Willimon's friend felt a twinge in his heart, not his biological heart, that muscle continuously pumping blood throughout the body. But that metaphorical theological heart we all have where our moral choices are made. He realized in that moment the evil of white supremacy that he fights through his ministry also lives in him.

Some might say that makes Willimon's friend a hypocrite and we should write him off as a bad person. But perhaps we human beings are more complex, and that moment of realization can be the start of a deeper understanding of his ministry, racism, his heart and be the beginning of a change of heart. It illustrates that we human beings can put too much faith and trust in programs, rules, regulations, legislation, charismatic leaders, entertainment, and assume those things will change people. But that is not true, not for everyone. Over the past year I have been participating in the Becoming Beloved Community initiative in our diocese and one of the conversations we have been having was started by

people who were active in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's. One person boasts that her parents both worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advocating for legislation to end segregation. Today this same person is saddened and shocked that despite the work of her parents and the laws that were passed that were supposed to end segregation, discrimination and racism are still alive in human hearts, influencing other legislation, harming families and communities. That has been a tough realization for lots of folks, although it is nothing new for Jesus who in today's Gospel reminds his followers that rules aren't the same thing as salvation.

That's not to say that we who follow Jesus shouldn't continue to work for justice for all people. Of course, we should. But the work may be harder and longer than we imagine. Because the problem of injustice isn't some outside influence that can be eradicated or controlled, it is something that resides in each and every one of us.

This is the point Jesus was making in the part of Mark's Gospel we just heard this morning. It can be a troubling one, which is why it might be more comfortable to focus on the part where the Pharisees were picking on Jesus and criticizing him by criticizing his disciples for not following the special set of laws called the purity codes. That is what was behind their complaint about hand washing. The Pharisees weren't worried about the disciples not following proper current pandemic protocol. This hand washing wasn't about germs or bodily hygiene. It was about following a set of rules or laws to show how a good, acceptable follower of God acts. Scholars believe the Pharisees' complaint in today's Gospel is evidence of a conflict in the community of early Christians where Mark's Gospel originated. This community had both Jewish and Gentile, or non-Jewish members and they had different ways of eating that were causing problems with people getting along.

Maybe that it true. It's certainly possible. But Jesus' point about traditions isn't intended to get us squabbling about the traditions of this parish, diocese, or the Episcopal Church in general. Traditions change, whether we like it not, but what is important is not what we cling to or change. According to Jesus it is the intention behind our traditions, whether they are traditions for worship or ministry or programs. It all gets down to the heart of the matter. Again, not our biological heart, but the part of us connected to God, the part of us where choices are made, and what informs and motivates our choices.

It is true that human beings are made in God's image. And that God proclaimed humanity good. This truth, however, does not mean everything we do or say is inherently innocent or good. Being made in God's image means we human beings are given the ability to choose. That is what free will is. We can use

this free will, this ability to choose, to choose God's way or our own way or the way of an institution. We can also choose what influences our free will. We have a church word for this practice. We call it morality.

Anglican writer and apologist C.S. Lewis wrote about morality. He said the misconception is that a moral life is one without fun or enjoyment. The assumption here is that only by greedily consuming massive quantities of whatever you want so that others can't have any, harming another person either with words or violence, being cruel and selfish are somehow fun. Lewis wrote morality is about how we choose and over time letting our choices form us into either creatures of Heaven or creatures of hell. In other words, we will become people who live in harmony with God and others or who are at war with God and others. Living in harmony with God leads to joy, peace, and hope while living at war with God leads to rage, horror and eternal loneliness.

Free will means our choices matter. They matter to God. They matter to us and to our families, friends, and communities. It goes a little deeper. Choosing God's way means surrendering our right to choose what we want in order to discern and choose what God wants for us. It's not easy. Free will means we are capable of goodness, and we are capable of evil.

Before I go any farther, I need to speak to what Jesus meant when he talked about evil. Popular culture, mythology, and other sources like to make evil look attractive, dramatic, something larger than life that is outside us. Like the personification of the devil or a greedy corporation that cares only about using natural resources and people to get as much money as they can. But evil can be much more subtle. According to St. Augustine, evil is the absence of good. Others define evil as the opposite of God's will. Evil is what causes extreme harm. Like assuming a person is a threat to you and your children just because of the color of their skin. Or assuming a person can't contribute to society or a relationship because of a physical, emotional, or mental illness, limitation or handicap. Or believing a person is of lesser value because of their gender or how much money they make. Or making assumptions about a person's intelligence by how they voted. I've met and listened to people who tell me how they are attracted to evil, even evil characters in movies or TV shows because they make evil seem glamorous, powerful, and fun.

It's not so easy to escape evil. That is why there are morality laws or programs, they are supposed to help form us into people of heaven. But rules and programs can backfire. They can unintentionally fuel the hate they were intended to squelch.

That is what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. Rules and laws will only go so far. Because the harm we cause each other begins in our hearts.

This realization isn't intended to make us feel hopeless. Because the truth is if we were already okay, then Jesus never would have come to be with us. One of the misconceptions about Jesus is that he was crucified because he taught that we should all treat each other with kindness. Jesus was crucified because he taught that he is God's Son who came to fulfill the law of the Old Testament, even the purity laws. This does not mean that because Jesus is the fulfillment of the law, we are free to be as selfish and self-righteous as we want. Instead, it means we are free to live into resurrection life of Jesus, where we don't have to be afraid to surrender our wills and follow God's will for our lives. That won't always be what we want, but it doesn't mean a life devoid of joy, enjoyment, relationships, or hope. Quite the contrary. It is the only way to truly find joy even when faced with the evils of life. Think about Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of Heaven, which he often likened to a big banquet or a party.

Which means when Will Willimon's friend found himself facing the evil of racism residing in his own heart, he didn't have to despair or believe all his work fighting racism was in vain. Instead, he can be brave enough to recognize its presence within him and surrender himself a little more to God's love, to confess the evil inside him, receive God's forgiveness, work on seeing all people as God's children, learn to delight in people, and let go of the idea of helping people from a place of privilege. It's as simple as learning not to make assumptions about others based on skin color, gender, race, age, ability, religion, socio-economic status, or political affiliation. And it is that difficult too. That is making room for resurrection life within our hearts, life that calls us beyond those assumptions to seeing people as God sees us.

Resurrection life starts when we truthfully acknowledge what is in our hearts: the good and the bad, and choose to give our hearts, our choices to God and choose what God wants. This might not always look like what others are doing. It might not yield enormous sums of money or prestige and it may take a lifetime, but it will lead to healing and joy and help us navigate through the good and evils in the world as grow even closer to God and each other and with God we grow into creatures of heaven who work to help make this world more like God's Kingdom of Heaven.