

St. Andrew's UMC
March 8th, 2009
Mark 8:31-38
"If Any Want To Become My Followers"

In 1971, a professor in Stanford University, Phillip Zimbardo, conducted a psychology experiment that simulated a prison setting in the basement of a building. According to the website of the experiment, these two are some of the questions the researchers posed: "What happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil, or does evil triumph?"

Many were reminded of this experiment, when those gruesome pictures of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were leaked to the media. Many were incredulous, how U.S. soldiers could turn into such sadistic tormentors. Those who were in the higher-up, however, reminded the nation that there is always a bad apple or two in the crate, and brushed them off as the work of a few bad apples.

But the website describes, almost prophetically, what happened in their two-week experiment that was abruptly cut short:

Our planned two-week investigation into the psychology of prison life had to be ended prematurely after only six days because of what the situation was doing to the college students who participated. In only a few days, our guards became sadistic and our prisoners became depressed and showed signs of extreme stress.

As the website explained, I was taught that sadism and extreme depression were the reasons why the experiment had to be abandoned prematurely. Then the other day, a TV program indicated that there was more to the story.

Zimbardo himself was in the program, speaking in front of the camera. According to what he said, it appeared to me that he did not intend to cut short the experiment at the time. He was fascinated by the unfolding of the events in the basement, and he fully intended to keep the experiment going. So what forced him to abandon it, I questioned myself. It turned out that it was not the sadistic and

distressful condition that his mock prison created, as the textbook said.

The researcher one day brought his woman to the basement, and proudly gave her the tour of his prison. After one look, she was so distressed by the condition the participants/prisoners were forced to endure, she confronted him. Of course, Zimbardo defended the integrity of his experiment. He was not going to abandon the experiment, just because a few participants were breaking down. It was all part of the experiment. But one sentence uttered from his woman seemed to have made an impact. She said that he had changed, and that she did not know he had this side in him.

I knew it, I thought. It was not the humanitarian concern for the mock-prisoners that motivated the researcher to shut down the experiment. It was the threat of looming loss of his woman's esteem in him, and the threat of the loss of his woman, that

largely motivated him to abandon the experiment.

Until then, the researcher viewed the experiment from the viewpoint of a detached scientist. He believed that it was important enough to continue. Only when his woman placed him in the "evil place," as its active participant/designer, only when he was threatened with the loss of some thing, or some one, that mattered to his life, he was forced to take a second look. That threat was real enough to motivate the warden of the mock prison to reevaluate the whole experiment, and abandon it altogether.

I believe that it is in the human nature that the human beings continue their practices, knowingly and unknowingly, as long as the burden of their practice is borne by others. They do not stop their practices, unless certain threat, something of the greater power, or a great loss, presents itself and challenges them.

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Fortunately, for the few, this kind of challenges does help them see things as they are, and see how painful it is for others to bear the burden of their practices. Unfortunately, for the most, these challenges contrarily motivate them further to defend their positions and strengthen their practices.

We can put this pattern of behavior in the religious context—that people do not want to acknowledge what harm they inflict on others, or to stop their harmful practice, when it has been pointed out to them: most people are *unrepentant*.

But for Jesus, everyone needs to repent. Hence, Jesus issued the universal call to repentance to anyone and everyone from the beginning of his ministry. There was no exception to that call. In that regard, one might discover that there was one group that was exempted from the moral scrutiny in the mock prison scheme: it was the researchers themselves.

It is understandable, because researchers cannot be the subjects and researchers at once. Researchers need to maintain the detached objectivity, in order to ensure the scientific integrity of the experiment.

In the experiment, the researchers designed and created the "evil place." Even though they are the ones who recruited the guards and the prisoners and put them in that "evil place," the researchers played the role of the detached observers who were exempted from any scrutiny of the ethical kind. If a government bureaucracy created an evil place, shouldn't the citizens question, whether that bureaucracy might be also evil? If Nazi doctors created an evil place and conducted experiment on live bodies, shouldn't we hold them accountable? If the researchers created an evil place, by the same logic, shouldn't we also suspect the researchers' moral integrity as well?

If we shift our focus from this mock prison in the basement of

the Stanford University to the real prison of Abu Ghraib, or Guantanamo, however, we are touching off a politicizing, if not controversial, issue: who is accountable for the action that took place in the prisons, and who should be exempted from such accountability?

The researchers cannot actually be the active participants of the experiment, since that would destroy the objectivity of the experiment. But in real life situation of the real prison, should the designers/creators and the interrogators be exempted from the moral indictment? Should only the guards be held accountable for the inhumane condition they maintained?

This question is a highly relevant one for the disciples of Christ to raise. We need to confront our own moral standard, and make sure that we apply the same standard for every one, just as the call to repentance is for every one, without exception. Who are the ones that we exempt from the moral and ethical accountability?

When an unjust condition is exposed to the eyes of the world, almost always the immediate offenders are identified and punished. What is often unseen, or lacking, is the political will to hold accountable those who have designed and created such an oppressive environment. There are those who are swept into the immoral situation, and there are those who designed and created the immoral situation. Only the small fish tend to be fried, in order to make examples, and the big fish are let go.

The world is reluctant to bring those designers and creators of "evil place" to justice, and often fail to hold them accountable. That is because those who design and create evil conditions are often the ones in the seat of power. People are afraid of speaking out against those who are in power, against those who designed and created oppressive and unjust conditions in the world—especially, while they still hold power. The price one

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pays for speaking out against them is usually their career, livelihood, and even lives.

As the consequence, those who are ultimately responsible for the atrocity and injustice in this world quite often get away with murder, literally. And always, those people whose fortunes are tied to the particular regime and its policies, provide the material support and the benefit of doubt on the regime's behalf. Those who seek the preservation of their fortunes and those who seek justice and righteousness engage in the lasting struggle against one another.

Those fortunes are exactly what Jesus was talking about, when he said:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

One needs to deny oneself those fortunes and other things that hold oneself hostage to perpetuation of injustice and

human evil. What does it mean to deny oneself and to take up one's cross? Is denying oneself saying, "I'm not a monster!", although one subjected many people to sadistic abuse? Is taking up cross as same as going through the grueling trials in the court for having been the sadistic guards?

If we want to identify the human evil, we would be mistaken, if we only focused on the evil acts of the immediate individuals. If that is the case, we would have to leave out those who designed and created such situations that permit or foster the human evil. We would have to excuse also the supporters whose fortunes are tied to the particular regime that designed and created such evil that cultivated sadism, violence, and injustice.

The call to repentance includes those who never actually struck anyone, who never intended atrocities, who only sat at the desk and designed and created the situation in which many others were forced into it, and to

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play the role of committing atrocities. Often these designers/creators are exempted, because they watch from behind the scene, or because they are powerful.

When Jesus calls us to repentance, he asks us to acknowledge our complicit involvement in the continuance of the evil condition which others designed and created. Jesus asks us to confess our accountability for the evil condition, to which we might have given support, or of which we might have been part, knowingly or unknowingly.

Such are the sins committed by a corporate body of people, or by a social or political structure—for example, institutions, bureaucracies, the society, political parties, military, or police, etc. No single individual is responsible for the whole thing. These are known as corporate sins, or structural evil. Because of the nebulous nature of the corporate sin, many refuse to accept their complicit association

with the human evil; or simply, they are unable to see it.

Jesus calls us to repentance, because God wants us to be made whole, to be healed of our brokenness. In order to be made whole, however, we must confess not only our individual sin, but also our corporate sin, or structural evil, as well. In order to be made whole, in order to be healed of the brokenness of our souls and the illnesses of our bodies, our spirits need to be cleansed not only of the individual sin but also of the corporate sin.

In order for any one to become the follower of Jesus, one first needs to repent of the sin. Then he or she may move on to the next stage of becoming the follower of Jesus: denying one's self and carrying one's own cross. But what does it mean to deny one's self and take up one's own cross?

How about denying oneself hors d'oeuvres or sweets for the Lent?

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How about denying oneself shopping or traveling for the Lent? I am not sure, which is a more spiritual thing to do: denying oneself the pleasure of desserts, or the pleasure of entertainment?

If that sounds too frivolous or inconsequential, how about relinquishing one's loyalty to the fortunes that ties oneself explicitly or implicitly to injustice? How about surrendering one's shield of power that preserves oneself from any prosecution of wrongdoing? How about renouncing the benefit of doubt that exempts oneself from the ethical indictment? Can you imagine what burden will such acts of denying oneself place upon one's shoulder? I tell you, it is the cross, not an inconvenience or an ill-repute, that Jesus meant by it.

In the human court of ethics, you may claim your immunity by saying that you are the researcher of the experiment; but in God's court, you cannot argue your

innocence from designing and creating the "evil place." From God's perspective, everyone is implicated in real life, and everyone needs to acknowledge their involvement. That is what Paul meant, when he said: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:22, 23)." We may not have struck or kicked anyone personally, but we need to discern that our corporate sin still weighs us down, whether we admit it or not.

A great many religious people do not experience the power of God working in their lives, despite their life-long association with the religion. That is so, because their sins obstruct the movement of God's spirit. Sin obstructs one's prayers and blunts one's discernment of God's wisdom and presence. God's power courses through our lives, when our individual and corporate sins no longer obstruct our relationship with God.

When we deny ourselves and take up our cross, we have

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already repented of our sins.
Experience, then, God's power
coursing through your life,
healing your bodies, liberating
your souls, and answering your
prayers.