

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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HITLER

His name still comes up frequently. The most recent reference for me was during a discussion of the parables from Mark with about 15 other people.

Hitler.

How did we get from parables to Hitler? At the time, it seemed like a natural progression following comments about good seed growing into an abundant crop while seed on rocky ground didn't grow at all. It led to remarks about good vs. evil and, of course, evil led to Hitler.

I thought I had a partial answer: Hitler was a psychopath with lots of major mental health disorders that, untreated, led to his destructive behavior. The real question is why and how did others allow him to achieve such power. As it turns out, that line of thinking may be wrong. I googled him and his presumed mental illness, but the references I read claimed that his medical records and detailed studies of his life do not indicate a mental illness and that he is responsible for his barbaric behavior.

Yes, he really was that evil. Deliberately.

So, is Hitler in hell? Some Catholics, conservatives and progressives, have no problem saying, "Yes, hell yes! And I can tell you some others who are there too." It seems like justice, especially divine justice, demands a hell, a state of being for people who deliberately do major evil. How much evil warrants eternal life in hell? Well, however you measure it, Hitler surely deserves it. They say.

Other Catholics may not be so sure. Some have difficulty reconciling a merciful God with a hell, even a hell for Hitler and others like him. Divine mercy supersedes divine justice and finds a way to transform the evil that humans do into the good that God creates. God mysteriously entices the evil-doing human to choose freely the overwhelming attraction of divine love. Jesus showed the way through his death and resurrection, overcoming evil with love, even forgiving those who killed him, "for they know not what they do." (Lk 24:34)

Does that make any sense? Too speculative and abstract for a chat?

Maybe. But the problem of good and evil coexisting, sometimes within the same person, is a pivotal mystery of life and morality. It slaps us in the face when we watch the evening news graphically reporting the day's international, national and local atrocities. It backs us into a scary corner when we know that someone we love has done something evil. It rattles our soul and buckles our knees when we finally acknowledge our own evil and our camouflaged complicity with the evil that surrounds us. Hitler may be the common short-hand for outrageous evil, but, in varying degrees, many versions of evil emanate from this species we call human.

Or, does evil come from the devil, as some insist?

Sorry, you're not going to find a short, pithy answer to the problem of good and evil, nor even the existence, absence, or function of hell here. And I don't think you can goggle it.

But I do have a few suggestions:

1. Even though definitive answers are unlikely, it is valuable to have this discussion periodically. It helps draw our attention to what we consider good and what is evil. For example, our constant exposure to violence in multiple forms can desensitize us to the evil of violence. Our familiarity with generosity, kindness, and compassion can minimize our appreciation of the value of those acts. Talking about these topics can sharpen our awareness of both good and evil. And what we believe about these questions does matter because they can shape our view of many other things.
2. If the mercy of God trumps the justice of God and no one goes to hell, what's the point of being Catholic/Christian? Or being and doing any good, regardless of your faith? Perhaps the point of Christianity is not about going to heaven or hell, but about going beyond that goal to loving better, believing deeper, and sharing hope. For many of us, "going beyond" means we need a faith community to nurture us, challenge us, and comfort us. Gospel language for this perspective is "The kingdom of God is within you.." (Lk 17:21) and "The reign of God is at hand..." (Mk 1:15)
3. If evil emerges from human beings, does that make human nature evil, depraved, condemnable? No. It makes humans free, with some capability of choice. But that freedom is sometimes compromised by a brain disorder, societal prejudices, or living conditions. The culpability for the evil that humans do ranges from fully culpable to fully inculpable. Fortunately, we don't get to make that judgment in terms of heaven or hell.

So, where is Hitler now? And what if the researchers I studied are wrong and Hitler did have a severe mental illness? Would that get him out of hell and into heaven?