

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

The Tower of Babel: What's in a Place?

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17 November 2008

For several months now I have been thinking, perhaps even obsessing, about how we can discover what we must do in order to do the right thing. Or to use biblical language how we can know or distinguish between good and evil. Hence this series of sermons titled "Knowing God, Knowing Good and Evil."

My concern was motivated not by theological curiosity but by numerous examples from our culture which suggest that the line between good and evil is not a sharp line but a smudge. Instead of a clear choice, there is ambiguity.

The nature of this ambiguity is succinctly expressed by the popular culture theologian Dexter Morgan when he wonders: "Am I a good person doing bad things? Or a bad person doing good things? Am I evil? Am I good? I am done asking these questions. I don't have the answers. Does anyone?"

Popular culture junkies will recognize Dexter Morgan not as a theologian but as a serial killer from the popular TV show "Dexter." Though he is a serial killer, Dexter is a serial killer with a twist. Working as a blood splatter analyst for a Florida Police Department, Dexter satisfies his obsession by identifying and killing criminals who have escaped legal justice. In other words Dexter kills bad guys who escape prosecution and imprisonment. By killing murderers and drug dealers who avoid criminal prosecution Dexter saves the lives of future victims. Is he a good person doing bad things, or a bad person doing good things? Is he good, or is he evil? The answer, as Dexter himself suggests, is ambiguous. The line between good and evil is blurred.

Or consider another example, not from popular culture but from the literary fiction of Toni Morrison, the last American novelist to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. In her most recent novel titled A Mercy, an African-American mother gives up her eight-year-old daughter so that a debt can be repaid to a white 1680's America farmer. The mother considers her action "a mercy" because she thinks her daughter would have a better life in the farmer's household. However an action which the mother

considers good is experienced during the course of the novel as evil by her abandoned daughter.

The ambiguity of good and evil is not just an interesting conflict which attracts audiences to fictional dramas. It reflects what we might call real life as well. This is probably why it presents such interesting fictional situations.

In a recent Newsweek article about the American President Andrew Jackson, historian Jon Meacham writes: "The America of Andrew Jackson professed a love of democracy but was willing to live with inequality; aimed for social justice but was prone to racism and intolerance; believe itself one nation but was narrowly divided and fought close elections; and occasionally acted arrogantly toward other countries while craving respect from them at the same time. Jackson himself was capable of great good and great evil, of expanding democratic opportunity to some while simultaneously defending slavery and masterminding the removal of the Indians from their native lands." Whether they are public figures or private citizens, characters from fiction or real people, this contradictory inclination to do great good and great evil describes most people.

Notice in these examples, how the theological language of good and evil has crept into everyday usage. We would like to know the difference between good and evil. We would like to know what to do in order to do right thing. Yet experience seems to suggest that the lines are smudged and the answers ambiguous.

We are not alone though. As we have discovered in this sermon series, Moses shared our concerns, and on two separate occasions he pressed God for a clear answer about what he should do in order to do the right thing. On both occasions he was sent away to carry out his task without knowing whether his actions would be "right rather than wrong." He was not only sent away to accept the human limitation of not knowing with certainty what he should do to do the right thing, but he was also sent away with a promise: a promise that God would be with him and a promise that God would be merciful toward him.

Given the uncertainty of these two stories, I then turned to a story I thought presented a clear distinction between good and evil, right and wrong--the story of Lot and his daughters. In revisiting the story though I came to realize that the narrator did not even attempt to evaluate the actions of either Lot or his daughters. Instead I discovered that King David was a descendent of

this ambiguous relationship between Lot and his daughters and that a descendent from King David was Jesus, the davidic messiah. How then are we to distinguish between good and evil?

These biblical reflections as well as those of our own culture suggest that we cannot clearly distinguish between good and evil, that we can not with certainty know whether we are doing the right thing. Yet we are uneasy about this ambiguity. In the community discussions following these sermons and in comments various individuals have made to me about them, I have sensed this disease as we try to make black and white what is gray. I too must acknowledge that I do not like the color gray. I much prefer the boldness of black and white to the blandness of a gray smudge. I am not happy with this blatant assault on my sense of right and wrong. I too am ill at ease with this ambiguity.

I don't like the ambiguity of gray because I want to be in control. I want to be the decider. I want the authority. I want to be guaranteed success. Control. Decision making authority. Success. These are all human endeavors. But according to the biblical story of Babel, these are human endeavors which are denied us, just because we are human and not God.

The story of the Tower of Babel culminates a series of stories at the beginning of the book of Genesis, stories which define us as human beings, as creatures created by God. The story of the man and the woman in the garden begins this series and suggests that only God as God can distinguish between good and evil. Such knowledge is denied humans because they are human, that is, creatures created by God and not God themselves. The story also suggests that as humans we like to be told "don't." We won't take "no" for an answer. We won't obey the prohibition not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

I came to understand this all too human characteristic in a dramatic way several years ago. One day in early November after school I stopped over at my neighbor's house. They were in the middle a family crisis. Their five year old daughter was crying uncontrollably in both pain and fear. When she finally calmed down, I learned the source of her discomfort. Remember it was about this time of the year. There was no snow yet, but the temperatures had dropped into the 20's. It seems as though my young neighbor had heard the previous day about that great Midwestern phenomenon of sticking your tongue on the monkey bars at school. Her parents, of course, told her not to

attempt this tempting feat. They described to her in some detail what the painful consequences would be. Yet the allure of this forbidden act proved too much for her. The next day at school she put her tongue on the monkey bars. Apparently her teacher was having a bad day and was not very gentle helping remove my young friend's tongue from the monkey bars. Hence the family crisis I observed.

It was not necessary that my five year old neighbor experience for herself the tongue-on-the-cold-monkey-bar phenomenon, \; yet we all know it was inevitable that she would, despite her parents' advice not to.

Both my story and the biblical story of the man and the woman in the garden suggest that there are consequences for refusing to heed a "no," for rejection a cautionary "don't." There are consequences for our failure to be content to live as humans without possessing divine control, authority, and knowledge.

The ongoing sequence of the biblical stories also suggests that we don't even live well with the consequences of our failings. As a result we continue attempts to take control, to wrestle authority from God, and to celebrate our success. We say as did the inhabitants of Babel: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves."

God of course rejects this assault, this storming of the heavens by humans. The language used to describe this rejection is interesting. God did not defend the divine turf but "came down to see the city and the tower which mortals had built." God does not build a fortress to protect the divine interests, but rather God "goes down" to meet humans on their turf, to observe first hand the human attempt to usurp divine power, to claim knowledge and evil, to make a name for themselves.

Yet again, God's response to such attempts to assume divine power is "no." God continues to reject all attempts to claim divine authority. Therefore, God diffuses the attempt by confusing human language. Knowing the difference between good and evil remains a divine attribute. Knowing with certainty what to do in order to do the right thing will not be a human achievement/accomplishment. Confusion will characterize all human attempts to figure this out. Like it or not, clarity is the province of God and God alone.

If we could clearly distinguish good from evil, we would not have so many different ethical theories ranging from deontology to utilitarianism. If we could know with certainty, we would not need courses in ethics.

Yet the divine "no" to the builders of the Tower of Babel is not the last word from God. This "no" is followed by a promise. The story which follows the Tower of Babel is the story of Abraham. When God first encounters Abraham, God not only promises Abraham a land, a great nation, and a blessing, God also promises Abraham that through his descendents all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Across the centuries this promise of blessing binds God to us and is fulfilled when God once again comes down to us, this time in the person of Jesus. Once again Matthew's genealogy is significant, for it reminds us that Jesus the Messiah is not only a descendent of David but also a descendent of Abraham.

The answer to our search for certainty, the answer to our quest for knowledge of good and evil, the answer to our desire to know what to do in order to do the right thing comes to us in a descendent of Abraham who forgive us these quests for human supremacy. This may not be the answer we seek, but it is the answer we receive. The confusion of Babel is replaced with the certain proclamation of God's presence with us and God's mercy toward us.



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Sign up now for service in soup kitchens of New York City over J-term break, OR be immersed in community and service along the Texas/Mexico border at Spring break, OR pray with young adults from all across the world at Taize' France in June. Details and registration in the chapel office.

### **Chapel Schedule**

Tuesday (18 <sup>th</sup> )	Chair of Moral Values Discussion- 3-1 rm-10 am
Wednesday (19 <sup>th</sup> )	Holy Communion, 10 am - Dan Siedel, UNOmaha Brass Choir, Senior Academy
Friday (21 <sup>st</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Dan Day, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (23 <sup>rd</sup> )	Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul
Monday (24 <sup>th</sup> )	Sung Matins, 10 am
Tuesday (25 <sup>th</sup> )	Unity Prayer, 10 am
THANKSGIVING VACATION - 26 <sup>th</sup> - 30 <sup>th</sup>	
Sunday (30 <sup>th</sup> )	Chapel decorating party - 8 pm