

"The Devil Made Me Do It"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, April 10, 2011

In the summer of 1971, social psychologist Phillip Zimbardo began an experiment in Palo Alto, California that would revolutionize our understanding of freedom. America had that same year banned cigarette ads from television, was still deeply entrenched in the Vietnam war abroad and protests at home, and President Nixon struggled in relating to the needs of the newly organized Black Caucus. Zimbardo selected twenty-four college-aged men of Palo Alto, California (not all college students) to volunteer for an experiment to understand the psychology of the imprisoned. They had been screened and determined to be psychologically stable and healthy, and were randomly assigned as either prisoner or guard.

The guards knew that the assigned prisoners had actually done nothing wrong, and the prisoners knew that the guards were simply other college-aged students. The assigned guards were notified a day earlier to help put the finishing touches on the mock prison in the basement of the Stanford Psychology building. The assigned *prisoners* were arrested on a Sunday morning for either burglary or armed robbery, with the assistance of the real Palo Alto police department, and assigned randomly into cells in groups of three. Everyone was contracted to be paid \$15 a day for the experiment and the simulation was to last two weeks. There were all told at the beginning that they could leave at any time.

The participants adapted to their assigned roles well beyond what even Professor Zimbardo himself expected. Those assigned as "Officers" displayed their authority to maintain prison order. It seemed that those assigned as guards fell into one of three categories: tough but fair guards who followed prison rules, "good guys" who did little favors for the prisoners but never punished them, and finally, about a third of the assigned guards were hostile, arbitrary, and inventive in their forms of prisoner humiliation. This group of those role-playing guards appeared to thoroughly enjoy the power they wielded, yet none of the tests or interviews were able to predict this behavior. The only link between personality and prison behavior was a finding that prisoners with a high degree of authoritarianism endured the authoritarian prison environment longer than did other prisoners. Although the guards were told they could not harm those playing prisoners, they developed creative ways in which to punish them: pushups and irrational counting off, dragging their only blanket through underbrush so that they had to spend hours picking out burrs if they wanted to use it. They even used a fire extinguisher against particularly bad inmates, and subjected some of the prisoners to further torture.

Those assigned to be prisoners wore smocks, were stripped naked, were forced to wear bags over their heads and subjected to humiliation and sleep deprivation. Even going to the toilet became a privilege which a guard could grant or deny at his whim. Rebellions were staged and an escape attempted by the prisoners, but many developed passive attitudes and would not join forces with the other assigned inmates for hunger strikes or negotiations. Some young men in the role of prisoners even inflicted punishment on other prisoners at the request of the guards.

In order to break the solidarity among the prisoners, one of the three cells was designated as a "privilege cell." The three "good" prisoners were given special privileges. They got their uniforms back and were allowed to wash and brush their teeth; the others were not. Privileged prisoners also got to eat special food in the presence of the other prisoners who had temporarily lost the privilege of eating. The guards then arbitrarily took some of these "good" prisoners and put them into the "bad" cells, and took some of the "bad" prisoners and put them into the "good" cell. Some of the prisoners who were the ringleaders then thought that the prisoners from the privileged cell must be informants, and suddenly the prisoners became distrustful of one another. Similar tactics are actually used by real guards in real prisons to break prisoner alliances. By dividing and conquering in this way, guards promote aggression among inmates, thereby deflecting it from themselves. The experiment even affected Zimbardo, himself the researcher, who in his capacity as "Prison Superintendent," lost sight of his role as psychologist and permitted the abuse to continue as though it were a real prison.

Less than thirty-six hours into the experiment, one prisoner began suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and rage. In spite of all of this, they had already begun thinking so much like prison authorities that those in charge thought he was trying to "con" them – to fool them into releasing him. The fourth day included a previously scheduled visiting hour for parents and friends. Worried that when the parents saw the state of the jail, they might insist on taking their sons home, guards and those conducting the experiment manipulated both the situation and the visitors by making the prison environment seem more pleasant and benign. They washed, shaved, and groomed the prisoners, had them clean and polish their cells, fed them a big dinner, played music on the intercom, and even had an attractive former Stanford cheerleader greet the visitors at the registration desk.

When the dozen or so visitors came, full of good humor at what seemed to be a novel, fun experience; this systematically brought the prisoners behavior under situational control. The visitors were made to register, to wait half an hour, were told that only two visitors could see any one prisoner, were limited to only ten minutes of visiting time, and had to be under the surveillance of a

guard during the visit. Of course, parents complained about these arbitrary rules, but remarkably, they complied with them. Some of the parents were upset when they saw how fatigued and distressed their sons were, but their reactions were not to take them home. The circumstances were too powerful. They began to work within the designated system to appeal privately to the Superintendent to try make conditions better for their sons. When one mother said she had never seen her son looking so bad, Zombardo responded by shifting the blame from the situation to her son. "What's the matter with your boy? Doesn't he sleep well?" Then he asked the father, "Don't you think your boy can handle this?" He bristled, "Of course he can -- he's a real tough kid, a leader." Turning to the mother, he said, "Come on Honey, we've wasted enough time already." And to Zimbardo he said, "See you again at the next visiting time." It was an experiment. A simulation. They all knew it. Everyone involved.

The next major event was a rumored mass escape plot. One of the guards overheard the prisoners talking about an escape that would take place immediately after visiting hours. The rumor was that the prisoner who had been released the night before was going to round up a bunch of his friends and break in to free the prisoners. Instead of acting like social psychologists and recording the pattern of rumor transmission, and preparing to observe the impending escape, those in charge reacted with concern over the security of their prison. They held a strategy session to plan how to foil the rumored escape. The rumor of the prison break turned out to be just a rumor. After spending an entire day planning to foil the escape, begging the real police department for help, dismantling most of the prison, and moving prisoners to a different location, someone was going to pay for this. All discipline escalated.

The following day more lines were blurred between reality and simulation. A priest had been scheduled to visit and interview each of the inmates separately. Everyone introduced themselves as a number. The chaplain asked them what they were doing to get out of the situation and whether or not they were working with a lawyer. Since of course no one was (it was a simulation!), this multiplied the anxiety of the inmates even more. The only prisoner who did not want to speak to the priest was a prisoner who was feeling sick, had refused to eat, and wanted to see a doctor rather than a priest. Eventually he was persuaded to come out of his cell and talk to the priest and superintendent, so they could see what kind of a doctor he needed. While talking to them, he broke down and began to cry hysterically. They took the chain off his foot, previously placed on every inmate to remind them of their position even as they slept. They took the nylon cap off his head, required to increase anonymity since they could not shave their heads. He was told to rest in a room that was adjacent to the prison

yard. While arrangements were made to get him some food and take him to see a doctor, one of the guards lined up all the other prisoners and had them chant aloud:

Prisoner #819 is a bad prisoner.

Because of what Prisoner #819 did,

my cell is a mess, Mr. Correctional Officer.

They shouted this statement in unison a dozen times. Through his tears, the prisoner said he could not leave because the others had labeled him a bad prisoner. Even though he was feeling sick, he wanted to go back and prove he was not a bad prisoner. Zimbardo responded with, "Listen, you are not #819. You are [his name], and my name is Dr. Zimbardo. I am a psychologist, not a prison superintendent, and this is not a real prison. This is just an experiment, and those are students, not prisoners, just like you. Let's go." He stopped crying suddenly, looked up at me like a small child awakened from a nightmare, and replied, "Okay, let's go."

A mock parole board had also been created as part of the experiment. The next day all prisoners who thought they had grounds for being paroled were chained together and individually brought before the Parole Board. The Board was composed mainly of people who were strangers to the prisoners (departmental secretaries and graduate students), and was headed by a top prison consultant. When prisoners were asked whether they would forfeit the money they had earned up to that time if we were to parole them, most said yes. But when the hearings ended by telling prisoners to go back to their cells while their requests were considered, every prisoner obeyed, even though they could have obtained exactly the same result simply by quitting the experiment at that moment.

The entire experiment was abruptly stopped after only six days. What finally caused them to call it off? First, the guards had begun to escalate their abuse of prisoners in the middle of the night, when they thought no researchers were watching. Their boredom had driven them to ever more pornographic and degrading abuse of the prisoners. Secondly, a recent Stanford Ph.D., brought in to conduct interviews with the guards and prisoners, strongly objected when she saw the prisoners being marched on a toilet run, bags over their heads, legs chained together, hands on each other's shoulders. Filled with outrage, she said, "It's terrible what you are doing to these boys!" Out of fifty or more outsiders who had seen the prison, she was the only one who ever questioned its morality. Once she countered the power of the situation, however, it became clear that the study should be ended.

I have given you just an outline of the happenings in the Stanford experiment. I highly recommend reading Zimbardo's latest book *The Lucifer Effect*. He goes into the relationships between what he

learned in the Stanford Experiment and the more recent atrocities in Abu Ghraib, as well as the dehumanization parallels – comparing the details in the experiment to the dehumanization that lead to genocide in Rwanda. What does this experiment have to do with us? Zimbardo's research suggests that evil is not simply a character trait. It is not a disposition. Perfectly normal, otherwise moral human beings can behave in ways in which they never believed they were capable.

We have been looking at *freedom* this month, and today I want to look at ways in which we may not be as free as we believe ourselves to be. The power centers of our culture – law, medicine, and religion – were founded on the idea of a dispositional definition of evil. A definition in which the culpability, illness, or evil are located in the character of the individual. It is not that simple. As a culture we are moving in our understanding of the relationship of culpability, illness, and sin away from the individual to a broader understanding of the relationship between the individual and the systems of which that individual is a part. It is easier to see in medicine as an example. In progressive health care, we do not isolate the individual from his or her environment when we look at the causes of illness. If a child comes into an office with lung problems, in addition to looking at the biology and chemistry of the child, we also ask whether or not there are smokers in the house or any other external circumstance. Do you have mold? Live next to a coal plant? You get the picture.

In diagnosing illness, it would be irresponsible to ignore the influences of the environment. Just as in medicine, external circumstances of which we are a part also play a huge role in whether or not we commit an unlawful act. We are making strides in this country regarding moving away from looking at the solo actor in the legal system as well; we are moving to drug courts and mental health courts that take into account situational influences such as addiction and mental illness. We still have a long way to go. Just as in law and medicine, our moral choices are also subject to external forces. In our free religious tradition, we have moved away from the concept of blaming the sinner. It used to be that someone was immoral because they were born a sinner, and therefore would be punished accordingly by God. We have moved to a concept of individual people making bad choices – love the sinner, hate the sin. In that model, everyone is equally as free to make choices about their own moral behavior.

The next step in an understanding of holistic morality is to recognize the interrelated connection of the systems of which we are a part and the behaviors we exhibit. We are not completely free to make what some would consider moral choices. We are not on a level playing field. Our circumstances contribute to and shape our opportunities to make moral choices. If you are surrounded by people who foster connection, value diversity, and hold you accountable to the moral standards which you

profess, you are more likely to behave morally. Looking at the environment is important. Case in point: the United States incarcerates more people per capita than any other country in the world. Oklahoma incarcerates more women than any other state. Therefore Oklahoma incarcerates more women than any other country in the world. So if the environment doesn't matter, then we should assume that Oklahoma is made up of the most dangerous and evil women in the world. Or another example: there are more African Americans in jail or on parole than there were slaves preceding the Civil War.

If we choose to ignore the influences of the external systems, like the number of people in poverty who are of color, or the arrest rates of minorities for the same behaviors, then we can conclude – and a lot of people do – that there is something wrong with “those people.” If you are part of a system that promotes anonymous behaviors instead of accountability and transparency, that fosters dehumanization instead of connection to difference, you are more likely to behave immorally. Zimbardo suggests that we are most likely to overestimate the freedom of the individual to choose their own behavior, and underestimate the influence of circumstance. We focus too much on motives, traits, genes, and personal pathologies, and ignore the situation or circumstantial influences on individual behavior.

I would argue that in our current situation, we even wield freedom as a weapon. When we assume no external factors, that everyone has an equal shot, we cannot say “I chose to go to law school,” and “He chose to be a heroin addict;” “He should have gone to law school.” We wield freedom as a weapon when we do not treat the mentally ill and then incarcerate them, saying they should have chosen differently. We wield freedom as a weapon when we ignore the influence of addiction, and then incarcerate them saying they should have chosen differently. We wield freedom as a weapon when we give the poor a horrible education, and then say it's too bad that they didn't choose to go to college. It is never that simple.

Those people assigned to be prison guards in the Stanford Experiment probably didn't go around making people suffer prior to those very specific circumstances. They were otherwise normal and moral people, who grew up with lots of opportunity and had never been in trouble before. If you had asked them before this experiment, “If we put you in a position of power, would you abuse, disrespect, and torture those whom you have power over?” they would have responded no. If you had asked those assigned as prisoners whether or not they would willingly give up their freedom and personal power, be humiliated and tortured for \$15 a day, all of them would have said no. For the most part, the world is not divided into GOOD or EVIL people; the world is divided into groups of

people who are in situations that create more opportunity to do things that we would consider to be good, and those who are in situations that create more opportunities to do things that we consider to be evil.

Our efforts to improve are systems to combat the Lucifer Effect are efforts that provide conditions so that more and more people will make their next decision a good one: a moral one and a legal decision, so that the systems of which they are a part influence individuals positively. What does that mean? It means improving the schools for everyone, leveling the playing field as much as possible. It means providing mental health and drug treatment for everyone who needs it. It means making sure that no one goes hungry; that people have their basic needs met. It means recognizing that we are not all starting from the same place, and that the way to increase freedom is to increase the number of healthy choices a person can make. Choices that are good for them, for the community, and that connect them to a future that we would all want to live in. It means finding ways to support people by creating opportunities for them to succeed.

Lastly, what if we were the ones with the power? How can we be sure that we will resist situational external influences that push us to go against our own value system? Dr. Zimbardo suggests from his research the way to resist the Lucifer Effect, to tell that devil “Get thee away from me, Satan:

1. Do not maintain an illusion of “personal invulnerability” – If it can happen to them, then it can happen to you, too.
2. Be ready [at any moment] to say the three most difficult phrases in the world: “*I was wrong*”, “*I made a mistake*”, and “*I’ve changed my mind.*” Cut bait, accept immediate loss of money, face, etc. that could lead to bigger long term losses
3. Separate your ego from your actions; that is independent from the occasional failure [so that you can rebound and make the next right choice].
4. Separate messenger from message in your mind. What decision would increase freedom?
5. Never allow yourself to be cut off emotionally from your familiar and trusted reference groups of family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, church. Try out your choices in your community.
6. Trust your intuition, gut feelings, when you sense you are becoming a target of influence
7. Recognize that rules are abstractions for controlling behavior and eliciting compliance and conformity – challenge them when necessary: ask, who made the rule? What purpose does it serve? Who maintains it? Does it make sense in this specific situation? What happens if you violate it? Insist that the rule be made explicit, so it cannot be modified and altered over time to suit the influence agent.

The participants in the Stanford Experiment could have left at any time. Could have returned to their suburban neighborhood and left that prison behind at any time. Who is responsible for what happened at Stanford in 1971? Who permitted the violence, and humiliation, and dehumanization? Everyone involved. When we take responsibility not only for our individual behavior but also for the actions and situations of the systems of which we are a part, then and only then will we be able to increase our freedoms, as well as our neighbors'.

May it be so.

Amen.