
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Evil

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Ah, the ultimate question, how do you reconcile God and evil?

The truth is that I never have. A lot has been written about this question. Most of the answers don't reconcile the two as much as eliminate one of them.

Some claim that evil exists, so there can't be a God.

It's just us. Evolution guides our development. Power is all that matters. It's as if we are playing a cosmic Game of Thrones. The strong, the well adapted survive; the weak, the maladapted die. The questions about "why" we do what we do have all been answered. All that remains are the questions about "how" we go about doing it.

Others claim that God exists, so there can't be real evil.

It's just an illusion. All is well. We think things like pain and suffering are evil, but that's just because we don't really understand them. The world is like a Persian rug. We see only the underside, which looks like a mess. God sees the top, which is, of course, beautiful.

It is interesting to me that each of these answers eliminates the possibility of human freedom. Each eliminates the tension of the question by taking us out of the answer. It may be logical, but it doesn't feel very real.

Your aunt has been working at the YWCA, counseling women who have been the victims of physical abuse. She comes home every day with a new story that breaks my heart. You can see a monstrous pattern that has taken over the lives of these women. They have suffered not only physical pain, but also a loss dignity and a sense of abandonment by the very family and friends on whom their lives depended.

Every story screams that it need not be this way. It's complicated, of course, and it often seems like only incremental progress is possible. But, the answer doesn't lie in pretending that what is happening to these women is somehow scientifically preordained or somehow good for them in ways that we don't yet understand.

The answer lies in our doing something about it or, as your aunt says, "moving our feet."

The 19th century Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, said something similar.

"Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path that never will be trod again. Wanderer, there is

no road – Only wakes upon the sea.”

I don't know how to reconcile God and evil, but I do know that we make the road by walking, and we have the choice for our next step to reduce the suffering of others.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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