READING "How Sin Will be Conquered" by A. Powell Davies

I have never agreed with those who tried to tell us that the whole idea of sin is out of date. To the best of my observation and belief, sin is highly contemporary, and we are all up to our necks in it.

But this doesn't mean that to avoid drowning in sin we must clutch at theological straws. It doesn't mean that we must surrender all attempts at swimming our way to shore. Nor does it mean that there is nothing left to do but call on God for a miracle.

It is not unnatural that theologians should concern themselves with sin. It is part of their special province. Moreover, sin has to do with reality—not necessarily with escapism. Evil in human life is not a fiction; it is a very somber fact. The popular psychologists—not the serious ones, not them for the most part, but the popular ones—did us a great disservice by making light of sin. It is true that guilt feelings are often obsessional, and it is also true that psychology has done much better than theology in dealing with these guilt feelings. But there is also guilt that results from actual evil—evil that is entirely real and for which the evil doer is responsible. It is this evil that is properly called sin.

I want to say some very simple, plain things about sin. We are sinners. About that there is no possible doubt. We have done badly. There is not much doubt about that either. But it is absolutely not true that we are nothing but sinners, or that we are drowning in sin and cannot be saved. And it is absolutely not true that we have done nothing but evil and have proved incapable of good. We are good people as well as bad people. And we do good deeds as well as bad deeds. We have done evil things in the world. But we have also done some very good things, even some rather magnificent and generous things. The confession in the Book of Common Prayer that "we have done those things we ought not to have done and left undone those things that we out to have done," is a large part of the truth. But not all of the truth. And the final clause of that confession, which says that "there is no health in us," is just a mean-spirited lie. There is health in us. And our hope is not in a miracle from the skies, but in the health that is in us! We shall not be defeated by fate; no, if we are defeated, it will only be by letting the health that is in us decay and become a mortal sickness.

If the world is saved—it seems to me—it will be by those who bring to God their sweat and toil, not by those who have nothing to bring but their tears.

SERMON "Destroying Hells" by Robin Bartlett

Let us pray. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, oh God of goodness. Amen.

In October 2010, our neighbors in Boston experienced one of the most heinous massacres in Boston's history. In Mattapan, four people were shot and killed, including a mother and her two year old boy in her arms. The victims were then dragged out into the street, naked,

where they were left lying for their neighbors to see. The incident, it is reported, was likely the result of gang and/or drug violence. There have been numerous murders—too many to mention—in Boston for the past few years…some of the bloodiest in recent memory.

Most of the murders have taken place in Boston's poorest neighborhoods. Many have taken place in *my* neighborhood. The victims have been primarily youth and young adults of color. These incidents are reminders that evil exists in our world—in our backyards—…that people can callously take human lives as if they were meaningless, and throw them out on the street like trash. Like waste. Splayed out naked in our streets. Surely that is the very definition of evil—a callousness—a disdain for human life—that causes the degradation of bodies; of souls.

Evil is one of those things that we just sort of know when we see it, right? The kind of callousness that would lead someone to shoot a toddler in cold blood…that is evil. The kind of callousness it takes to murder 6 million Jews in the holocaust...that is evil. The kind of callousness that would cause someone to fly planes into buildings of working civilians. That is evil.

Yes, these events are our proof that evil exists in the world, no matter how optimistic we are—no matter how convinced we are in inherent worth and dignity of all human beings--no matter how strong our Unitarian "onward and upward" theology of the perfectability of the human spirit—no matter how sure we are of the Love that holds us all—no matter how fervently we hold fast to the belief that this love can conquer anything.

The fact is, we don't see evidence of this love conquering ***all*** evil. As A. Powell Davies pointed out in the reading we heard this morning, evil in human life is not a fiction, it is a very somber fact. Evil happens every day. Rabbi Harold Kushner writes, "Sometimes, in our cleverness, we try to persuade ourselves that what we call evil is not real . . . but is only a condition of not enough goodness, even as 'cold' means 'not enough heat,' or darkness is a name we give to the absence of light."

So though we believe in goodness, we know that there is not enough of it, and somewhere deep down we know that evil is real. And when things like this tragedy in Mattapan happen, we maybe think a lot about what might cause someone to shoot a 2 year old in cold blood, and we psychologize and we sociologize and we theologize. Some of us call the perpetrators "evil" or at least the crime itself "evil", because we are sure that this kind of crime is the opposite of good, and that therefore, these kinds of people are the opposite of good. And, if we're being honest we might admit that incidents like this help us to also do a little comparison that bolsters our own goodness; our own righteousness. We say to ourselves, "Well, I am not *that*. I am not them." If evil is set up in direct opposition to good, witnessing this kind of tragedy is a way to feel like *we* are good. *We* are in opposition to

that kind of killing; that kind of disdain for human life. We are not *that*. We are, therefore, good.

The thing is, we cannot separate ourselves from any of these incidents of human sin and evil, from the chemical weapons used against civilians and children in Syria to the man who shot and killed 13 coworkers at the Navy Yard in Washington, DC last week.

And we can't separate ourselves from the 2010 murder in Mattapan. Sure, the surface-level message for someone like me after the murders was, "don't worry, your kids are safe. These people aren't like you. They are poor. They do drugs. They are involved in gangs. They are not like you. *They are not like you*." And for you all in New Hampshire, you might feel even safer, knowing that you live miles and a world away from Boston. It did feel oddly safe in my little car, driving down Blue Hill Ave through Mattapan on my way from Jamaica Plain to Milton, passing the site of the murders—so many murders—every day. My privilege allowed me to put on blinders like the kind they give to easily distracted horses so that I might ignore the carnage.

But the thing is, I am—we are all--part of this human collective. We are each other's neighbors, both physical and spiritual.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, a lawyer pointedly asks Jesus "Who is my neighbor?" The lawyer knew when he asked that the definition of the word literally meant "one who is near", and therefore typically meant "a fellow Jew". In other words, he wanted the answer from Jesus to be "someone like *him*." Someone like *me*.

Worship services on Sunday mornings in our suburban Boston UU churches reflect the lawyer's sentiment, don't they? When I ask people what they appreciate about church, they often say that it is a place where they can find other "like-minded people." This always strikes me as strange for the denomination that desires explicitly to be theologically diverse. The subtext is "I want to be worshipping with people from my culture". White liberals. NPR listeners. White collar workers. The rich. People with college degrees. People who are quiet in worship. People who appreciate a good pipe organ. *People who make me feel safe.* As Jesus reminds us in the parable of the Good Samaritan, this safety is an illusion. And all of humanity includes our neighbors—the robber, the priest, the Samaritan, the murderer and the murdered, the poor, the rich, the Muslim, the Jew.

And because we are all neighbors, intimately connected, we all participate in each other's sins. Those of us in the dominant culture benefit from the system of evil that helped perpetuate this crime in Mattapan—and others like it--against our neighbors—the cycle of poverty and violence born out of economic and racial injustice. We actively participate in this system of evil by using our privilege to ignore it; by not claiming our place within it. By speeding down Blue Hill Avenue as the priests and Levites did in the story of the Good Samaritan, ignoring the broken, naked bodies in the road. "*They are not like me. They are not like me. They are not me.*" We divorce ourselves from evil because we live so separately

from one another. But *because* we remain separate, we each participate in this murder of bodies; of souls. Just as our salvation is wrapped up in one another's, so are our sins.

And therefore, we have a job to do! As liberal religionists, as members of the human race…we have a job to do. And it is an urgent one. Henry Clay Ledyard said that "The mission of the Universalist church has been a double one, first to contravert the one-time prevalent idea of an endless hell. This part of the mission has practically been accomplished. . . But the second and more important one awaits fulfillment . . . a fight which shall continue until the real, actual hells, before our very eyes, are destroyed."

Our job, my friends, is to destroy hells. The hells that we encounter here on earth, before our eyes. The first step is to admit that we participate in a system of evil, and the second step is to admit that we need one another to fight.

And we destroy hells together by humbly getting out of our comfort zones. You know, those comfort zones where we separate by category—we separate into people who "think like us" and "look like us" and "act like us". These comfort zones keep us in our separate neighborhoods; our separate political parties; our separate races; our separate churches, synagogues and mosques. These comfort zones implore us to define ourselves by difference—young, old, Republican, Democrat, Black, White, gay, straight, rich, poor, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Unitarian Universalist.

When the Mattapan murders occurred, my friend Matt invited me and my church's youth and their adult mentors to come to Morning Star Baptist church in Mattapan--a large and influential African American church where Matt is a youth minister--for a peace vigil on a Friday night. Family members of the victims are congregants at Morning Star, and Matt invited me because I was a neighbor—a religious leader at a neighboring church in Milton, about a mile and a world away from his church.

I brought about twelve people from my theologically and politically liberal, predominantly white, middle to upper class Unitarian Universalist church, about half of whom were teenagers. We were the only white people there, and we were warmly welcomed like brothers and sisters. Our youth got right to work with the Morning Star youth, putting candles in milk containers so they wouldn't blow out in the chilly wind outside. Truthfully, we felt nervous and out of our element. Our theological and cultural differences were vast. But, I brought my then 5 month old, and she was passed lovingly around the circle into the arms of people I had never met. We prayed a lot before we left to march, the UU youth completely taken aback by shouts of "Amen" and "thank you Jesus".

We marched through the streets of Mattapan together that night—crying, singing, praying—finally stopping in front of the house in which the murders occurred. There was a makeshift memorial with teddy bears and pictures and flowers for the victims. At one

point, Matt shouted angrily at giggling teenagers, lest they lose the somber, serious point of the event--referring to our work together as nothing less than a "spiritual war for our souls—for the soul of the city." "People are DYING. Your people are dying," he yelled over the crowd.

Now as UUs, we don't use the term "spiritual warfare" all that often. Frankly, we don't have to. Our rank and file is generally a privileged rank and file. Many of us live far enough away—culturally, educationally, economically—if not by many miles—from Mattapan. Many of us don't feel the same urgency my friend Matt does about taking up spiritual arms to fight evil. And it's not because of our theological differences. Most of us aren't being confronted on a daily basis with the degradation of our bodies with real, actual weaponry like our neighbors are. But as participants in a system of economic injustice, privilege, poverty and violence, we should feel the urgency just as keenly, as if we have the same need to protect our own physical bodies. Our people are dying. And please make no mistake about it: these neighbors are OUR people.

Universalist Mary Ashton Rice Livermore said that "As our [life] experience deepens, we realize that the whole world is one vast encampment, and that every man and woman is a soldier. We have not voluntarily enlisted into this service, with an understanding of the hardness of the warfare, and an acceptance of its terms and conditions, but have been drafted into the conflict, and cannot escape taking part in it. We are not even allowed to choose our place in the ranks, but have been pushed into life . . . and cannot be discharged until mustered out by death. Nor is it permitted to furnish a substitute . . . We may prove deserters or traitors, and struggle to the rear during the conflict, or go over to the enemy and fight under the flag of wrong. But the fact remains that we are all drafted into the battle of life, and are expected to do our duty according to the best of our ability."

This battle is not easy, and it is so tempting to struggle to the rear during the conflict, or to go over to the enemy and fight under the flag of wrong because it is more comfortable. It takes vulnerability to stay on the side of good. It takes some serious guts.

We were freaked the day we went to Mattapan to march. We didn't fit in. We spoke different languages. There was an ocean of hurt and guilt and separation between us. We needed a common language. We needed humility most of all. We also knew we needed something like the God who transcends all differences; the God in the in-between spaces--to help us form a bridge over the ocean.

Prayer was the language we could share to name the evil that needed to be destroyed; the hell we bore witness to. We all felt powerless in the face of unspeakable tragedy, but we were together. Healing happened in the passing of babies, in the sharing of pizza, in the lighting of candles; in the singing of songs. Spiritual warfare was being fought through the

process of meeting one another across difference and allowing ourselves to be connected in shared humanity—in shared divinity.

We, too, can fight the systems of evil that maintain the separation between human beings based on ethnicity, race and social class for the benefit of keeping people powerless. We, too, can fight systems of evil that put profits ahead of human lives. Each of us, our community, our country—we can fight systems of evil—evil that has destroyed our land, evil that has led to health care being treated as a commodity rather than a basic human right, evil that has left us powerless as the gap between rich and poor in the richest country in the world grew to its biggest gap since 1915--rivaling the third world.

We can fight this evil. We can take off the blinders born of privilege and complacency and feeling powerless and fight this.

The world will be saved, Davies tells us, by people who bring their sweat and toil, not just their tears. Friends, as Unitarian Universalists—as fellow world citizens—we are called not just to despair of evil, but to fight it. Name evil when you see it. Don't name it as "other"—but as a part of who you are as well—who *we* are. Once we recognize ourselves in one another—our good and our evil and all the gray area in between--we can save one another in the goodness we know can conquer all. But we need to be willing to stand side by side in the fight for the soul of our cities, our communities, our country and our world. May we have the courage to take up arms of love and justice in the fight.

Amen.