

The Evil That We Do

Last Sunday, June 21, Fathers' Day, at 11a.m., during the first service since the diabolical massacre of nine worshipful congregants at the Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the Reverend Norvel Goff there delivered a stem-winder. Such sermonizing may not be everyone's cup of wine (it happens not to be mine, at least when the cup is filled to the brim), but such disfavor is, really, a matter of taste and of one's custom. What is not a matter of taste is the Reverend's theology, and that (if I may risk an orthodoxy) he got just right.

It was an arresting performance marked by gratitude, anger, humor, sadness, and the severity of unambiguous instruction, particularly for skeptics. Are you confused by the forgiving response of the victims' families to the act of the "evil-doer," as the Reverend designated the killer? Well, that's because you don't know their "Daddy" (certainly alluding to Jesus's "abba" in Mark 14:36). If you knew Him, the Reverend instructed, there would be no confusion, for that is who our Daddy is. There was the instruction.

But with the lesson there also came an admonition, though not one – surprisingly and so refreshingly – directed at his listeners. When I used the word 'diabolical' above I did not mean it in any facile sense, and the Reverend Goff certainly would not. Rather, he was sending “. . . a message to every *demon in hell and on earth*” [my italics, his shouting]. And he means it.

The sins are ours – to be rid of them we must own them – and they are never marginal, never trivial, but they are end-products. The Reverend Goff (I believe) means to name something more ferocious than sin, namely, it's accomplice. As C. S. Lewis reminds us in *The Screwtape Letters* the devil will use anything, race-hatred as well as lust or ____ (you can

fill in the blank), to weave our complicity into his machinations. After all, once you are in Hell, it really doesn't matter to him (this is Lewis again) what got you there. He knows very well what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once tried to teach us: "the battleline between good and evil runs through the heart of every man." Along the way, he is perfectly happy of course to have you make a Hell on earth.

In his newest thriller, *I, Ripper*, Stephen Hunter gets it just right. He has Jeb, his opportunistic reporter, after viewing Jack's most recent atrocity, attribute the following to the Ripper: *"I am carnage, slaughter, destruction for its own sake. I will remind you: It is your vanity to believe you have come so far and left me behind. You will never leave me behind. Don't you see it yet? I am you."*

A Postmodern (or by now are we post-Postmodern?), secularized, theophobic population does not, and maybe *will* not, get it; instead it cracks a condescending smirk. To that population I say, Yes, by all means let us combat our sinful adornments, as long as we acknowledge that they do not lie in "structures." Otherwise we are bailing out the sinking rowboat with a tin can full of holes. The abominations will endure, confounding, afflicting and dividing us. That's why I, for one, am on the side of the likes of Norvel Goff, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and C. S. Lewis, the side that believes in damaged hearts and fallen angels.