

*Good and Evil in British Mysteries<sup>1</sup>*  
*Rev. Myke Johnson*  
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*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

*Opening Words*

This past summer, I found myself binge-watching British mysteries on Netflix—*Foyle's War*, *Inspector Lewis*, *Father Brown*, and others. I noticed that mysteries raise theological questions more often than not, particularly about human nature, and the problem of good and evil. Today we explore that age-old question.

*Time For All Ages*    The Golden Rule    (adapted from the story as told by Sophia Lyon Fahs)<sup>2</sup>  
A long long time ago, there was a Jewish teacher named Jesus. He would travel from town to town, and talk to the people who came to learn from him. When Jesus came into town, someone who knew him was sure to pass the word around. A plan would be worked out for him to be at a certain place when evening came and the day's work was done.

Sometimes Jesus would teach in the house of a friend. Sometimes he would teach on a grassy hill. Sometimes he would go down to the lake, and get in the boat of his fishermen friends, and the people would sit on the rocks on the shore. That way it was easy to hear. They didn't have microphones then.

Some of the people who listened to Jesus were very discouraged. Some were so poor they did not get enough to eat. Some had sick children to take care of at home. Some were old and in pain. Sometimes children came too. Some of the people felt that nobody cared for them. They were always given the meanest jobs to do and they were always being scolded because they did not do them well enough. Often they would go home after listening to Jesus, and they would remember one little story or one short sentence that Jesus had said. But that little bit they remembered a long, long time, because it was so helpful to them.

One evening as Jesus was sitting in the boat one of the men asked a question. "I am a shepherd," he said. "I have to spend long hours out in the fields. When eating time comes, I cannot always find a brook where I can wash my hands before I eat. It is the rule, is it not, that we should always wash our hands before eating? Do you think, Jesus, that I am a bad man because I have to eat my lunch without washing my hands?"

"Certainly not," said Jesus with a smile. "You are not a bad man simply because you eat without washing your hands when you are in the fields and cannot do so. Unwashed hands cannot make a person bad anyway. Goodness and badness are inside of you, not in your skin."

Then a woman spoke up and asked another question. "There are many of us here, Jesus, who have never learned to read. We have not gone to school. We have not been able to study the laws in the Bible. We can't remember all the laws we hear about in the synagogue. There seem to be hundreds of laws we must follow if we want to please God. But we simply cannot remember them all. Do you think, Jesus, that we are bad because we can't remember all the laws?"

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2 From *From Long Ago and Many Lands* by Sophia Lyon Fahs, second edition (Boston: Skinner House, 1995).  
<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/welcome/session4/118229.shtml>

Jesus said: "For many years, our leaders have been teaching us through these laws and rules. They meant to help us know how to live a good life, but somehow it got too complicated. You know what, friends? Being good is not just obeying a large number of rules. You could obey every single one of the rules, and still not really be good. Whether you are good or not depends on what is inside your heart. Are you hateful or loving toward others? Are you angry or patient with the person who hurts you? Those are the things that count."

One of the men listening said, "That sounds good, Jesus. But I wish you would tell us in just one sentence what is most important so that we won't forget."

Jesus smiled at this and said: "Your wish reminds me of a story about our great teacher Hillel. One day a student said to Hillel: 'Tell me, Rabbi, what all the laws put together mean and tell me so simply that I can hear it all while I stand on one foot.'" At this everyone laughed. "Hillel gave the student a very good answer and a very short one," said Jesus. "Hillel said: 'Never do to anyone else what is hateful to you. This is all the laws put together. All the rest is just an explanation of that one short rule.'"

Then Jesus added his own thought. "I would say this rule in just a little different way. I would say: Do to others what you would like to have others do to you." "That's a good rule," said the workman who had asked the question. "I could have stood on one foot easily while you said that." "What do you think? Should we try to stand on one foot while we say it? 'Do to others what you would like to have others do to you.'"

Jesus said, "Try the rule. It doesn't take long to say it, but it may take a long time to learn to follow it." When his talk was over, the people got up from the ground and walked along the shore to their homes, very relieved. Jesus had given them something they could understand and something they could remember. In fact, it was so easy to remember, that we still remember it after 2000 years. We call it the Golden Rule. Shall we say it one more time? "Do to others what you would like to have others do to you."

*Reading:* Coyotes Mark Jarman<sup>3</sup>  
Is this world truly fallen? They say no.  
For there's the new moon, there's the Milky Way,  
There's the rattler with a wren's egg in its mouth,  
And there's the panting rabbit they will eat.  
They sing their wild hymn on the dark slope,  
Reading the stars like notes of hilarious music.  
Is this a fallen world? How could it be?

And yet we're crying over the stars again,  
And over the uncertainty of death,  
Which we suspect will divide us all forever.  
I'm tired of those who broadcast their certainties,  
Constantly on their cell phones to their redeemer.  
Is this a fallen world? For them it is.  
But there's that starlit burst of animal laughter.

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<sup>3</sup> Published in *The Atlantic* (May 2003).

The day has sent its fires scattering.  
The night has risen from its burning bed.  
Our tears are proof that love is meant for life  
And for the living. And this chorus of praise,  
Which the pet dogs of the neighborhood are answering  
Nostalgically, invites our answer, too.  
Is this a fallen world? How could it be?

### *Sermon*

In the BBC mystery series, *Inspector Lewis*, our two main characters are long-time police Detective Inspector Robbie Lewis, and his younger Sergeant, James Hathaway, working in the university town of Oxford. Each week they are called on to investigate murders, interview family members and suspects, and figure out who did the crime. Sergeant Hathaway was educated at Cambridge and had been in training for the priesthood. He is a brilliant, thoughtful soul who sometimes wonders what he is doing as a police detective.

In an episode in Season 6, he and Lewis are discussing Lewis's possible retirement from the force, and Hathaway reopens the question of his own future.<sup>4</sup>

Hathaway: This job makes you look at things differently, doesn't it?

Lewis: I always told you it would.

Hathaway: Yeah, I know. I didn't understand. I don't like what I've become. I used to think that people were basically good. Now I don't, and I don't know when that changed.

Lewis: Well, that's just a sign that you're a seasoned copper. It's not a sign that you should chuck it all in.

Are people basically good? Or not? From the perspective of a “copper” who deals with murderers every week, the goodness of people might be a hard position to defend. Despite their primary purpose to entertain, many television mystery series are inherently theological, wrestling with questions of good and evil and everything in between, wrestling with all the mysteries of human nature.

Perhaps that is also the fascination in this genre with clergy who take up amateur detecting. Adam Hearlson, in an article in *Christian Century*, notes that “One obsessive cataloguer has counted more than 350 clergy detectives in literature.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, the prophet Daniel in the Jewish scriptures is solving mysteries on behalf of the Jewish community in 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

In the series, *Grantchester*, Anglican vicar Sidney Chambers teams up with the local Detective Inspector Geordie Keating. Sydney explains to his younger colleague, Leonard, “It’s life we deal in, Leonard. The good, the bad—all the gray areas in between.” He defends his involvement in crime solving as an extension of his ministry. “As a priest, isn’t everything our business?” he asks. “There is no part of the human heart which is not our responsibility.”

Similarly, the sleuthing priest in *Father Brown* sees a natural link between his religious work and his detective work. He can't keep himself from following after the criminals he encounters, not merely to bring them to justice, but also trying to save their souls. Father Brown, the character, is rather stubborn

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4 (Season 6, Episode 3)

5 “Mystery and ministry in Grantchester and beyond,” by Adam Hearlson, August 30, 2017, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/mystery-ministry-grantchester-and-beyond?reload=1510093915807>

and disobedient in his choice to get involved in crime solving, but essentially he is a good and benevolent man. He has a deep humility and compassion born of his belief that all human beings need redemption.

In the pilot episode, Father Brown says to a woman who was ashamed to talk to him, “Trust me, there’s not much in my line of work I haven’t heard.” He sees all people as flawed, but inherently redeemable, even his arch-nemesis, Flambeau. Father Brown keeps giving Flambeau another chance, pursuing him to discover what broke his spirit and turned him to a life of crime; he offers redemption through old-fashioned repentance and conversion, and the grace of a loving God.

I read somewhere long ago that the mystery genre as a whole is inherently conservative. It upholds mainstream ideas of law and order, power and responsibility. In order to arrest someone for murder, the detective must believe that human beings are capable of murder. Evil is seen as an individual aberration that can be put right by yielding to confession and punishment. Mysteries usually do not offer any critique of social injustice, for example, though a sleuth like Father Brown has compassion for the circumstances that cause people to stray.

Father Brown first came into existence in the writings of G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton was part of a group of mystery writers, including Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayer, whose prime commitment was for their detectives to solve crimes based on wit and reason, rather than any sort of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, or Coincidence. So they were modern in their own way, with a basic faith in logic and reason applied to old-fashioned morality tales.

Hearlson writes,

This collection of writers ushered in a golden age of mysteries in the interwar years in England. Their stories follow talented sleuths into secluded mansions or small villages. It is assumed in these golden age mysteries that order can be restored. Murder, theft, and missing persons are temporary eruptions of chaos in an otherwise ordered world. The job of the detective is to reinstate that order.

...The detectives take for granted the idea that the past order of the community was good; why restore it otherwise? The detective rarely examines the structural issues that might inspire the crime or bristles at the ways in which the social hierarchy empowers some and disenfranchises others.

On the other hand, Nick Baldock, history professor at Lancing College, writes,

The radical flaw at the heart of this interpretation [—that mysteries are about a return to order—] is the failure to see that the whodunit is premised on the doctrine of Original Sin. Everybody is guilty of something; it may offer hope that the problem has a solution, but evil will not be expunged as a result. It is one problem with one solution; it is a small victory in a much larger, indeed an eternal, war. The detective novel is the world’s most Augustinian genre and not, in consequence, especially reassuring.<sup>6</sup>

But to combine these perspectives, we might conclude that British mysteries hold a pessimistic view of individual human nature, but an optimistic view of the social order. And that can have a certain escapist appeal. Father Brown, Hercule Poirot, DCI Barnaby in *Midsomer Murders*. We know that the

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6 <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2009/08/the-christian-world-of-agatha-christie>

crime will be solved, the evil-doer will be found out, justice will be done, and order will be restored. It presents human sin and redemption all completed during one hour. Real life is never quite so clear cut.

I haven't watched all the seasons of *Grantchester*, but I notice that it is not so simply satisfying as these other shows. Why? Perhaps because its view of the social order is not quite so optimistic. It wrestles with the shadow side of human nature not merely in the murderer of the week, but through the shadow side of its clergy protagonist. Sydney Chambers is a complex character. He is struggling with his own inner darkness, and with memories from his time as a soldier in World War Two. As Adam Hearlson writes, "He drinks too much whiskey, suffers from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, hates sherry, and—perhaps most concerning for his parish—is constantly playing detective."<sup>7</sup>

Hearlson goes on to say, "Chambers's knowledge of the shadows also means that the community will put the burdensome questions of theodicy onto the shoulders of its minister. This is the great contribution the *Grantchester* Mysteries makes to the golden age detective type: clergy make good detectives because they are willing to bear the burden of theodicy." Theodicy, for those non-theologians among us, essentially refers to the question of how a good God can allow evil to exist in the world, or in light of the evil that does exist in the world, it asks how God can exist at all. Sydney Chambers is always trying to make sense of the evil he has seen, in the criminals he encounters, but also in the war he suffered, and in himself—it is not simple for him. And it is no coincidence that it is set in post-World War Two England.

Our Unitarian Universalist ancestors were known for their belief that human beings are basically good. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain and America, this was a radical idea. Our forebears were repudiating the dour Puritan dogma that all human beings were inherently sinful. Unitarians and Universalists believed in human goodness, in human progress, in applying human effort to bring about a positive world. But this optimistic belief was hard hit by the events of the second world war. If humanity is good, how could Hitler exist, how could the holocaust happen?

Nazi Germany was a problem that our foundational beliefs weren't adequate to address. It wasn't just Unitarians and Universalists. All of the liberal faith communities had to wrestle once again with the question of evil. In fact, simplifying it somewhat, we can say that modern religious conservatism, and even fundamentalism, grew in response to the failure of the optimistic view of human nature—these modern movements emphasized again the sinfulness of humankind, and the need to rely on something larger than ourselves.

James Luther Adams was a Unitarian theologian who wrestled with all of this. Today would have been his 116<sup>th</sup> birthday, so it seems fitting to bring him into the discussion. And in our time, perhaps all of us are struggling again with that question of good and evil. We live in an era in which Neo-Nazi's are marching openly in the streets, and mass shootings are becoming ubiquitous. Since June of 2016, there have been 555 mass shootings in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Mass shootings are defined as those in which at least 4 people are killed or injured in one event at the same time and location. It becomes almost too much each time to hear more stories of the dead, the background of the shooter, the unheeded arguments about gun control.

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7 "Mystery and ministry in *Grantchester* and beyond," by Adam Hearlson, August 30, 2017, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/mystery-ministry-grantchester-and-beyond?reload=1510093915807>

8 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/02/opinion/editorials/mass-shootings-congress.html>

So what does James Luther Adams offer us? He offers challenging questions. He wrote about his work with young American army officers preparing for service in the occupation army in Germany. He realized that as he lectured to them about the evils of Naziism, an unintended side effect could be a kind of self-righteousness in his students. So he started pushing them to discern what exactly they were fighting for. If they were merely gung-ho for their own country, how was that different from the Nazis who saw their nation as superior? He resisted the tendency of people to reduce evil to the characteristics of the enemy, with good on our side.

In one session, he asked, “Is there any essential difference between your attitude to the Negro and the Jew, and the Nazi attitude toward other 'races'--not a difference in brutality but a difference in basic philosophy?” He was dismayed at how immediately he was besieged with racist questions and comebacks. So he kept asking his question: “How do you distinguish between yourself and a Nazi?” It wasn't enough that we were on our side, and they were on the other side. Good and evil were not about which country you belonged to. It had to be more about the values we were holding and practicing.

Perhaps my favorite British mystery is *Foyle's War*, which follows the exploits of DCS Christopher Foyle as he works against crime on the home front during World War II. Foyle is committed to upholding the rule of law and decency, but the issues of crime and punishment, evil and culpability has been complicated by the rules of war. Sometimes the criminals get away because they are important American businessmen who can manufacture weapons that the British need. Sometimes the people in government are skirting the law under the rationale that in a time of war, right and wrong no longer apply.

Foyle challenged the officials who had decided they must “play dirty” to defeat a man like Hitler. If we play dirty, if we go against our own basic principles to fight this evil, then what are we fighting for? I like how *Foyle's War* thoughtfully explores these complex areas. But I especially like the character of Christopher Foyle because he tries to hold clear to what is right and good, even in the midst of complexity.

Since Nazi Germany, it has been harder for mainstream white society to hold on to the assumption that society is the enforcer of good order. It was a devastating wake-up call. Of course, people of color already knew that the order which was enforced by society was only good for some of the people. In the real world, police brutality and racism are as much a concern as criminal murder. But for many, World War Two was a wake up call. After Hitler, international courts also upheld the idea that people are still responsible for murder, even if they are merely following orders.

James Luther Adams challenges us to know our own deepest values, that center of our loyalty that he calls our *faith*. Adams also challenges a myth that still haunts our movement, the idea that because we are a free faith, UU's can believe whatever we want. He says, we are free to choose our own faith, but we must ask, Which faith *should* be mine? We must ask, How can we determine the difference between truth and falsehood, good and evil? Ultimately, “a free church is that community which is committed to determining what is rightly of ultimate concern to persons.”<sup>9</sup> For Adams, the testing ground was the community, in which ideas and values were discussed, tested, and critiqued and people learned from each other.

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9 *The Essential James Luther Adams*, edited by George Kimmich Beach, (Skinner House), p. 39. Essay originally published in 1946.

So his was not a simple answer, not one that you could recite standing on one foot. But it is one that can draw on the wisdom of Hillel or Jesus, along with other ethical teachers, as part of how we wrestle with our own answers. Not because of *who* said it, but because it offers a guide that our hearts and our community can discern as deeply true and right. “Never do to anyone else what is hateful to you. Do to others what you would like them to do to you.” Two ways of framing what is good. It doesn't answer the question of whether we are already basically good or evil, but rather shifts the focus to what we must do to act with goodness.

I think perhaps that we UU's need to make room for more nuance in our optimistic view of human nature. Yes, our first principle speaks about the “inherent worth and dignity of each person.” Sometimes people will confide in me about how they are challenged by figures in public life who don't seem to fit their conception of inherent worth and dignity. But honoring inherent *worth* is not the same as affirming that each person is *good*. Another source of our tradition challenges us “to confront powers and structures of evil...” In order to confront the powers and structures of evil, we must certainly be able to make judgements about good and evil. To be able to identify what is evil is as critical to our faith as inherent worth and dignity.

That sentence continues—“to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” I hear that message echoed in what DCS Foyle was trying to convey—if in order to fight the enemy, we stoop to the level of the enemy, then we become something other than what we believe in, what we hope to be. Then, even if we win, we have already lost. We believe in justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. If we can live out that compassion and justice and love, then we have already won.

I will always remember a scene from one of the final episodes of *Foyle's War*, after the war was over, and Foyle had retired. We see him getting on a plane to the United States, to go after that murderer who had been a manufacturer too important for his British bosses to jail. But Foyle is determined that justice shall prevail in the end. In a world of so many uncertainties, there is comfort in that.

### *Closing Words*

I won't ask you to stand on one foot. But let's hear again the simple statement about goodness that Jesus brought to the people around him:

Go and "Do to others what you would like to have others do to you."