

I'm going to begin this sermon with a warning; as it will reflect on occurrences from the past week, it contains adult themes. If there are guardians who would prefer that their children not hear them, I suggest they join the others in Sunday School. I apologize for any inconvenience this causes.

A couple of times during the sermon we will be invited to sing a hymn as a refrain. *Goodness Is Stronger than Evil* is an adaptation of a prayer written by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as South Africa was coming out of its period of sanctioned Apartheid. You can find it in the *Glory to God* hymnal #750. And it will also be on the screen. **Let's sing through it now - you can remain seated.**

I imagine most of you heard the news about, and have even seen the video of, Renee Nicole Good being shot and killed by an ICE agent in Minneapolis on Wednesday morning. Many people have been writing powerful think pieces and prayers for the numerous instances of injustice that happen in our nation and abroad. On Thursday morning I went looking for a prayer to read that could help give me perspective. Help me center.

Share John Pavlovitz's piece from Jan 08, 2026.

<https://johnpavlovitz.substack.com/p/america-will-we-stand-with-renee>

It's easy to oversimplify this life; to abandon nuance in favor of a simple, binary choice that leaves no room for complexity. ...

(S)ometimes the occasion demands a simple decision.

Some moments are a sharp moral line, inviting us to declare a side.

Some moments are all-or-nothing, pass-fail tests of our very humanity.

This is where we are.

This moment is about whether we will stand with good or with evil.

Her name was Renee Nicole Good.

Good.

And she was good.

Goodness is easy to see.

Good pours itself out for its child.

Good does the same for others' children.

Good writes and creates art and brings beauty into the world.

Good radiates warmth, generates laughter, and embodies kindness.

Good fiercely embraces both friend and stranger.

Good cherishes the disparate humanity around it.

Good loves its neighbors enough to move into harm's way on their behalf.

Good bears witness to inhumanity and refuses to look away.

Good nurtures and protects life regardless of the cost.

And on a January morning in her Minneapolis neighborhood, Renee Nicole

Good encountered Evil.

Evil declares a hollow, vicious, violent war on human beings for the color of their skin all to curry the favor of a racist multitude.

Evil drives pregnant women's faces into the pavement, it randomly kidnaps fathers, zip-ties children, it abducts teenagers.

Evil terrorizes communities from behind the cover of armor and masks and unchecked power.

Evil brutalizes strangers without any rhyme or reason, emboldened by the belief that accountability will never come.

Evil brutally invades the life of a human being without cause or conscience. Evil moves toward a terrified, fleeing mother, fires point-blank into her face, and casually walks away without a hint of remorse as she bleeds out. Evil denies a dying woman medical care or any kind of tenderness in her final second.

Evil orphans a 6-year-old child and acts as if it has done something righteous.

And evil stands in front of the nation, and from the highest seats of power, lies through its teeth, adding insult to mortal injury, assassinating the character of an innocent human being, slaughtered for caring for a stranger.

Evil labels a murdered woman a domestic terrorist because it has so been consumed by a craven lust for power that it is allergic to truth and immune to empathy.

Evil floods its social media profiles with slander and falsehoods. It expresses no sorrow, no compassion, no grief at a young mother's execution for nothing but the whims of a masked monster who should never have been in her neighborhood to begin with.

And make no mistake, evil remains silent right now.

Pavlovitz continues,

I don't know what kind of person you imagine you are, but I'm willing to bet you'd say that you were a good one. Most of us believe that.

But good is not expressed in our heads, but in the sum of our choices, about the people we decide to be in the tangible and concrete.

Good is about the discomfort we carry, the turbulence we step into, and the courage we display.

Good does not cower in the presence of evil.

Good does not wait for someone else to do something.

Good does not avert its eyes or cover its ears or scroll away from the nightmares of others, simply because the horrors have not yet reached them.

Good doesn't allow itself to be so numbed by the legion of horrors around it that it is no longer able to respond.

Good does not abide evil in the places it calls home.

Renee Nicole Good died at the hands of evil, but we can make sure that she has the last word, that she did not die in vain, that Good will live on.

We cannot allow evil to prevail.

We cannot calm down or shut up.

We cannot let fear render us invisible or quiet.

We must be the people who take a side, who meet this moment, who declare that we have had it with hatred having the run of the house.

The choice could not be clearer, America.

{The choice could not be clearer, Church.}

Will we stand with Good or with Evil?

Sing "Goodness Is Stronger than Evil" (*Glory to God 750*)

For me, Pavlovitz's column is one of the voices of a modern-day John the Baptizer. When the Pharisees and Sadducees joined other Jews who flooded out

to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, the prophet singled them out and said pointedly to them,

You nest of poisonous snakes! Who warned you to run and hide from the coming storm? 8You are like trees without fruit. Prove to others, *by the way you live*, that you have returned to the good road. 9Do you think you can say, 'Father of Many Nations (Abraham) is our ancestor'? Do you not know the Great Spirit can make these stones into his children? 10The tomahawk is already at the root of the trees, and the ones that have no good fruit will be cut down and tossed into the fire. (*First Nations Version*, emphasis added)

While the Pharisees and the Sadducees may have been meant to be exemplars, I'm not so concerned about them – that was Matthew's issue. I care for you. I care that you have an understanding of the gospel of Jesus the Christ that leads you to choose, as Pavlovitz states it bluntly, Good over Evil. Unfortunately it has become clearer and clearer each day that both are present and accounted for in our nation. It used to be that we could say "I'm a good, church-going Christian" and assume the best about ourselves. But the truth is, we see plenty of people who call themselves "Christian," who are closer to being snakes in the wilderness than they are bearing good fruit.

John testified that none can assume their goodness. Due to the fact that we live in a complexly human society, we have to do our own work of filtering what we learn, and what we have been brought up to understand. We are called to treat our motivations like the grain and chaff of which John spoke:

- storing that which nourishes our souls and helps us to be a blessing in the world, and

- burning away that which eats at our wellbeing and causes us to perpetuate that which is hurtful or dysfunctional ... even that which is propagated by our silence.

John knew that God's anointed was in the world. John knew that the kin-dom was at hand. And so John offered people an extremely compelling ritual to allow them to signify that they were ready to embrace kin-dom values - those things that would bring honor to the ways of God.

As Evil strikes in our own time, we too can recognize that the Kin-dom of God is at hand. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, God has called

us in righteousness;

(has) taken (us) by the hand and kept (us);

(has) given (us) as a covenant to the people,

a light to the nations,

7 to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,

from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Sing "Goodness Is Stronger than Evil" (*Glory to God 750*)

Earlier in the service we engaged in the ritual of remembering our baptism. I always find this to be a moving experience, as feeling that water on our heads or hands is a tactile reminder of God's claim upon our lives.

Indeed, baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace. It is a blessing that is initiated by God, and enacted by Jesus, to remind us that we, like Jesus, are God's

“much-loved children, who make God’s heart glad.” (First Nations) And just as the Holy Spirit rested upon Jesus, the Spirit of the Resurrected and Living Christ stirs through us and empowers us to act.

As John was announcing the coming of the Christ into the world, he said this (and I’m reading from *The Message* translation): “The main character in this drama (Jesus) ... will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out.”

I made the conscious choice to keep in the liturgy the part in which we must profess that we “turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world.” This is a major part of our covenant with God. We promise to engage in this relationship in order to work with God on “bring(ing) forth justice to the nations.” (Is 47:1d)

Remembering our Baptism is meant to ignite our lives. “Turning from sin” and “Renouncing evil and its power” are *active commitments* we must make throughout our lives. *John* the Baptizer said of the Religious Leaders, “You are like trees without fruit.” *John* Pavlovitz wrote, “good is not expressed in our heads, but in the sum of our choices, about the people we decide to be in the tangible and concrete.”

This is, perhaps, why Jesus said to John that they must perform the ritual of baptism together. It could not have been a more tangible and concrete action to show that Jesus travelled the same path as those he came to set free. It’s no coincidence that the river in which John was baptizing was the Jordan. It was through that river that the children of Abraham crossed to inaugurate the new life God promised them in a new land. And it was into and out from that river

that Jesus put his stamp on the new life he and John were instituting that day. Many feel that Jesus' submersion is a symbol of death, and his rising from the water is symbolic of the new life he would later accomplish in his resurrection from the tomb.

We have the same opportunity to move from a fear-based life into a life of confidence in the power of God to overturn the death-dealing principalities and powers of our own time. The Mission of the Baptized is to make the choices day by day, sometimes hour by hour, to fashion our actions into the ones that follow the Way of Jesus into New Life; Abundant Life. Faith moves us to do just that in courage and confidence. After all, goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness; and, yes my friends, life is stronger than death. Victory is ours...victory is ours through God who loves us. VICTORY IS OURS, VICTORY IS OURS THROUGH GOD WHO LOVES US!

Let us sing it one more time ... this time standing in body or in spirit ... as we prepare to go out into the world standing on the promises of the Covenant of Baptism.

Sing "Goodness Is Stronger than Evil" (*Glory to God 750*)