Demonizing the Other
A. Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
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Well, demonization itself can help ... to provide an alibi. You succumb to the Devil incarnate, and as a result you’re not guilty yourself. —Hannah Arendt


Today I would like us to focus on a phenomenon that occasionally emerges throughout human history. This morning I would like to talk about the social phenomenon of demonizing the Other.

This is a practice that is done by the dominant group in a society. It is not an individual act, although individuals participate in it. Demonizing happens when a large group within a culture consistently makes a generalization about another more vulnerable group, casting them all as violent and dangerous. Everything is framed as “us vs. them.” The group that is demonized is de-humanized. They are the hated enemy. They are the cause of all of our problems. To demonize is to take the most extreme view about the Other that can be taken. They are sub-human. They are animals. The threat is exaggerated, so that they are to be feared, hated and eradicated.

Now, I want you to notice that there is a big difference between criticizing someone and demonizing them. Sometimes individuals will attempt to deflect valid criticism by claiming that they are being demonized. And this can be an effective strategy. First, it delegitimizes the actual content of the criticism by calling the motives into question. So someone says, “They are just trying to demonize me” or “that’s just fake news” or “that investigator has a political agenda.” And what this does is to not address the actual content of the criticism but negate the entire process of the criticism itself. Second, this strategy of claiming to be demonized saps the meaning of the term and obscures the ugly reality that there are those who really are being demonized, and it is not just a clever argument to avoid responsibility.

Criticizing someone’s specific actions or words or policies is not demonizing them. Demonizing involves making generalizations and abstractions. Criticizing, which is legitimate and, in a democracy, necessary—involves evaluating particular things that an individual has actually said or done. Demonizing involves completely condemning the Other, casting their entire being as defective and dangerous.

When the European colonizers came to this continent, they demonized the native inhabitants of this land. They were defined as animals, as less-than-human. They were to be feared and not trusted. And by demonizing them, this justified unspeakable acts of cruelty against them.

In Nazi Germany, the dominant groups demonized the Jewish and gay and lesbian persons. They were seen as subhuman, a threat to society, the cause of all the problems. They generalized that they were all greedy, dishonest and criminal, and that they were to be feared. They were, as a group, categorically condemned.

Here’s the thing about demonizing the Other: it leads to horrific action. As Voltaire famously said, “Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.” And in Germany it led,
of course, to the imprisonment and murder of over six million human beings. The demonizing—the words—led to violent and cruel actions.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said,

You have heard that you shall not murder. But anyone who hates—who promotes hatred—who calls another an idiot or worthless—is guilty.

Those who engage in hateful speech, in demonizing the Other, bear responsibility for the actions that follow. They are guilty of the murder, too.

One of my favorite writers, Richard Rohr, recently wrote,

The evil and genocide of World War II was the final result of decades of negative and paranoid thinking among good German Christians, Catholic and Lutheran. The tragic fascism of Nazi Germany was fomenting in people’s hearts long before a political leader came to catalyze their hate and resentment. Now it seems we are seeing the same in the United States.

And so, it is everyone’s responsibility to oppose and stop the sickness of demonizing the Other before it is too late. As the Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemoller, imprisoned by the Nazis, famously wrote:

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

And friends, I feel compelled to address this ugly phenomenon of demonizing the Other because we are witnessing its increase in our nation today. And history will judge us whether we spoke out or did anything to oppose it. Our children and their children will ask, “What did you do to stop it?”

Today we are hearing more and more rhetoric against the poor, generalizing and characterizing them as morally defective, as trying to game the system, as lazy, as underserving, as a drag on our society. And we are seeing an attempt to treat them more harshly, to increase work requirements designed simply to remove them from help they are receiving, to cut spending and take away healthcare from millions, resulting in misery, suffering and death of many, many children of God. Most people who are poor in this country work full time. Many of the poor are children. Demonizing them is a sin, leading to inhumane policy.

Today we are seeing the demonization of our Muslim brothers and sisters. All Muslims are viewed by many as violent terrorists, generalized as a grave threat to our security, even though, empirically, this is simply not true. Of all the mass murders in this nation over the past decade, none have been perpetrated by Muslim immigrants, and almost all have been perpetrated by White Christian men. And with this hate speech we see a rise in hate crime and the burning of mosques. And we see unjust policies of banning movement and immigration from majority Muslim countries. The demonization of Muslim brothers and sisters is a sin.
Today we are also seeing the demonization of **immigrants from Mexico and Central America.** Over 11 million who have been in our country for years without papers, not because they didn’t want proper documentation but because our immigrations policy made it impossible. And there are thousands who come to the border each month, fleeing from violence, oppression and crushing poverty.

Instead of looking upon them with compassion, more anymore are making unjust generalizations, casting these families as criminals, as rapists, as drug dealers, as gang members—when in reality, this is only a very tiny portion of those who immigrate. Immigrants are far less likely than the average American to commit a violent offense. Many of those seeking asylum are victims of the gangs, victims of the violence. And yet, they are viciously demonized as “animals” that create an “infestation” that must be “eradicated.” They are unjustly blamed for taking jobs and taking from the social system, when in fact, they contribute more and create more job than they take. And we have seen how this rhetoric has led to cruel deterrent policy, separating children from their parents for months, putting them in cages. This is morally reprehensible. And we need to say loud and clear that the demonization of our immigrant sisters and brothers is a sin.

We must also be clear, that this demonizing of the Other is being promoted by politicians to build their political base. Historically, this is often a strategy by governmental representatives to maintain power and control—distracting people from the theft, corruption and injustice by the regime. When the wealthy are stealing the nation blind, it is useful to have a vulnerable group as a focus of hatred and blame.

If there is anybody who should speak out against this sin of demonizing, it should be the church. For we follow the one who challenged this at every turn. Jesus challenged generalizing and condemning entire groups of people unjustly.

In his very first sermon, people were complaining that Jesus was showing too much love and grace to those in Galilee. They were the Other. Jesus should be concerned more with his own kind! Judea First! Make Judea Great Again! So Jesus said: Look, God cares for all people, including the Other. Remember when there was a drought and famine, Elijah was sent to a widow in Sidon (to the northwest)—to the Other. And remember when there were all these lepers in Israel, yet Elisha cleansed one from Syria (to the northeast)—one of those Others. God’s love includes them, too.

Those in the synagogue were so angry at Jesus for challenging their demonizing that they “ground their teeth” and tried to throw him off a cliff. How’s that for a first sermon?

Jesus challenged the demonizing of the Other, this “us vs. them,” the exaggerating the threat and fear of the Other, casting them as violent and dangerous. Jesus advocated loving one’s neighbor, not demonizing them. When he was asked, Who is my neighbor? He used the famous example of the Good Samaritan, who was from a group of the hated and feared Other, who was now the example of the true neighbor. If it were told today, Jesus might make the demonized migrant from south of the border the hero of the story and the example of the true, loving neighbor.

And Jesus identified with the Other, with those seen as less-than-human, with the lepers and the impure, with the poor, the naked and the homeless, with the prisoners and the criminals.
You now, it has been said that we either will transform our pain, or we will transmit it. And so as a nation and individually, may we not simply transmit our pain to a more vulnerable group of people. In the end, that accomplishes nothing, simply just more hurt people. But rather, may we transform our pain, so that we may be more empathetic and understanding of the pain of others.

Now is our time.

We must rise up and oppose this destructive movement to demonize the Other in America.

We must challenge any of the politicians and the powerful who would cynically manipulate the fear of the masses and stoke the fires of hatred and bigotry just to strengthen their grip.

We must stand up for our neighbor, that they may not be demonized, but respected, cared for and loved.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)