

THE OLD MEETING HOUSE
EAST MONTPELIER CENTER, VT

October 23, 2011

“On Twinkies, Zombies, and the Love of God”

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When I was in college, a movie came out that many, many of my friends were obsessed with. The promotional tagline at the bottom of the posters read: Bought Coffee. Called Mom. Dodged Zombies.

The title? *Shaun of the Dead*.

Shaun’s life is not what he had hoped it would be, and in order to gain back his girlfriend, and his self-respect, he must prove himself. The timing is unfortunate, however, because wooing his girlfriend back keeps getting interrupted by zombies. It is, of course, a parody – one of those brilliant parodies that are better than the originals – of the Night of the Living Dead and Dawn of the Dead movies. If one reads too much into light British parodies, (and I do) Shaun is not so much fighting zombies, but fighting his own sense of meaninglessness and inadequacy. He has been Shaun, living dead.

In the original Night of the Living Dead movies, the zombies – or living dead – were caused by a radiation accident. Their meaninglessness is caused by our technology. By *Shaun of the Dead* in 2004, it doesn’t even matter what caused the zombies. We are never told. They simply are.

This, of course, is only one of a hundred movies, tv shows and popular novels in the past decade that revolve around zombies and vampires. *Twilight*, *Tru Blood*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Zombieland*, *Daybreakers*, *Angel*, *28 Days Later*, *Anne Rice*. This is a very, very abbreviated list.

There are, in fact, so many zombie and vampire references in popular culture lately, that philosophers have begun studying it. Sociologists have long understood that horror movies represent our greatest fears as a society. In the 50s and 60s, after the bombing of Japan and in the middle of the cold war, our movies were dominated by the radioactive for good and evil – *Spiderman*, *Godzilla*, etc. Now, they have quite clearly mutated into zombies. Some speculate

that it is because we now have a great fear of infectious diseases. Instead of nuclear warfare, our fears reside in biological warfare.

This is, I suppose, accurate. But I think there is another, better explanation.

In the recent movie *Zombieland*, as the last few survivors are hunted constantly by their formerly human peers, their sole purpose in life becomes to reach back into their childhood and find those moments and things that made them happy. For one character, played by the great Woody Harrelson, the meaning of life is contained in this one, single monologue: "There is a box of Twinkies in that grocery store, not just any box of Twinkies, the last box of Twinkies that anyone will enjoy in the whole universe. Believe it or not, Twinkies have an expiration date. Someday very soon, life's little Twinkie gauge is going to go...empty."

Even those who survive do not know what they are surviving for.

Our hapless hero Shaun, in the morning at the beginning of the film, he gets up, goes across the street to get his morning coke, all the while passing people on the street, shuffling through their daily routines. It takes Shaun more than a day to realize that the people around him are turning into the living dead – so similar is their everyday life to this life of ultimate horror. Trying to discern who is a zombie, one of the characters says, "just look at the face: it's vacant, with a hint of sadness. Like a drunk who's lost a bet."

A few weeks ago, I believe it was on NPR's "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me" game-show, Peter Sagal made this joke – and it has stuck with me. Zombies walk through life unaware of their surroundings. Vampires have no purpose but gluttony in every form. Zombies and Vampires have one thing in common: they live solely to consume. Perhaps the way they represent our greatest fear is that they represent a meaningless existence.

Put another way, zombies and vampires mirror back to us the very real question of our souls. They act out our greatest fantasies: an existence unencumbered by social rules. An existence oriented totally towards the bodily, physical gluttonies. Long lives equal excess money. Excess drink. Excess lust. Excess sex. They boil existence down to the very minimum because they are unencumbered by any thoughts other than survival. They are the funhouse distorted mirror image of our lives. We watch and wonder whether or not they have a soul. Is such a creature worth saving?

And by extension, we wonder – are we are worth saving?

Another way of thinking of this is through the lens with which Paul Tillich, 20th century philosopher and theologian provides us. Tillich understood God to be our matter of "ultimate concern" – the thing that we are most ultimately and intimately involved with. Oriented properly, this would be God, love, justice. Our whole being would be wrapped up in living. More often, however, we find ourselves wrapped up in other things.

It has been said that Tillich once asked his students in a lecture, “what is it that you wake up thinking about in the morning?”

Do you wake up thinking about the beauty of creation, the glory of each new day, the joy of your own beating heart? Or do you wake up thinking about your to-do list, or your deadlines, or thinking, “I need coffee,” or “I have to get through this,” or “can you believe those stupid [insert political group here that thinks differently from you]”? What you wake up thinking about, Tillich argues, is the sign of how you have ultimately oriented your life. What you wake up thinking about, he says, is what you worship.

What did you worship this morning?

This morning’s scripture ends a long series of challenges that the various sects of Jewish authorities were posing to Jesus. They were trying to trap him, get him to slip up on a legality, so that they could discredit him. What about taxes, Jesus? What about marriage? If a woman has 7 husbands, who does she marry in heaven? This last question is less of a trap than a final question – asked out of exhaustion. “Fine, Jesus, if you know so much, what is the greatest commandment? God gave us ten, choose one.”

It is a challenge, a dare. Go ahead, prove to us how much you know.

And he does. From the list of ten, Jesus provides one. *Love your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind.* If you do this, all the rest will follow.

Yesterday I had the incredible joy of going with Brian Vachon and our 8 confirmands on a spiritual retreat. We took ourselves to a secluded cabin the woods. We played games. We talked about our lives. We noted that it is easier to feel spiritual in a place like that. Brian, phenomenal leader that he is, wouldn’t let us off the hook. He brought with him articles, clipped from the week’s news. The violence in Israel and Palestine. The history of the AIDS epidemic. The death penalty. If we are thinking about God, going on retreat, we must still never stop confronting the reality of existence. Where is God in all this? Is God?

Isn’t that the issue? We wake up to pain in the morning. We wake up to violence. To very real problems. To mean girls at school. To loss. To political issues that won’t go away. We wake up to a broken people. And a broken world.

How much easier is it to worship the physical – the things of the body. The things we can manage. That new toy that makes our lives just a little easier. The to-do list that gives us an illusion of control. How much easier it is to value touch. Power. Money. Those things bring us pleasure. They at the very least keep us warm. Keep us fed. Keep our daily lives running smoothly on their little tracks.

If we were to wake up in the morning and think about God, wouldn't we have to wake up and confront those very real places where we *don't* see God? God's non-existence? In poverty and war and famine and violence and flooding and death? How do you love that God? With all your heart and soul and mind? How?

At the very least, if we wake up in the morning and think about God, wouldn't we have to think about how our everyday lives *don't* worry much about poverty and famine and violence and flooding and death?

Moses, having led his people for forty years, through starvation and thirst, slavery and the seemingly greater perils of freedom, rises to the top of Mount Pisgah.

And he sees it. Spread out below him. "There it is, Moses," God whispers. "The balm of Gilead. Judah. Jericho. The city of palm trees, and beauty and rest. There it is. The land that your father, and your father's father, and your father's father's father was promised. I told you it was there."

And then Moses dies.

You see, the key to all this, the key to waking up *whole*, is believing in that mountain. And you all *believe* in that mountain. I know you do. The key to loving God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, is being able to stand where you are – no matter how bad, no matter how good, to look out and say, "I see it."

"I have been to the mountain top," Martin Luther King, Jr. declared.

I have seen Gilead up ahead. It is bigger than any one lifetime. It is bigger than any one person. Any one people. It is bigger than 10 generations, than 100 generations, or even a thousand generations. But I *see* it.

Gilead is *there* when I fail. When my heart breaks in two. When all the systems of sin and pain trap us, I see it. Up ahead. There *is* a promised land in which we are meant to live. Every single one of you knows that place. That place of milk and honey, and palm trees. That place of wholeness.

As I am getting to know all of you, I know you **all** *want* Gilead for yourselves, for each other. We all *long* for that place for the world.

Well that longing, as Tillich would say, is your longing for God. Whether that is the language you would use, that, as Jesus would say, is God calling you to Her. That longing is God cutting through all the brokenness, all the triviality, calling you, saying:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment.³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰**On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”**

All those other things we love – the exquisiteness of touch, the exquisiteness of a beautiful, full meal, even of a technology or device that simplifies or saves our life – these *are* certainly *of* God. Far too often in Christian theology you hear that we are meant to renounce these things of the body, those things we love. And that’s just impossible. No wonder we question the existence of God. If God is not in coffee, then God isn’t. No one can tell me that God isn’t in that full bag of candy and that exhausted look on your kid’s face at the end of the night.

The feel of a sticky child’s hand in yours, the feel of a warm body nuzzled close, the feeling of purpose our jobs and our causes provide us – those *are of* God. But they *are not* God. If we make them so, then we risk ending up like Shaun, or Woody Harrelson, when life is nothing but a box of twinkies. Those twinkies – all those loves we feel and experience are meant to point us forward. Making them the end point means we miss the bigger picture. We miss God. We miss God calling us forward into Gilead – into the land of milk and honey, of peace in Israel and Palestine, of cured diseases and full bellies.

Moses went up to the mountain top.

I have let you see it with your own eyes, God whispered.

Not just to Moses. But to you.