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Evil, Disease and Sin
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A few weeks have passed since the murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie. While contemplating the event and its publicity, I am struck by the language the media used to describe this terrible deed; they spoke in the terminology of disease. The alleged perpetrators of the crime are "sick!" or "psychopaths." A hundred years ago, we would have said they were "evil." The differences between then and now impact how our community is dealing with this tragic crime.

Evil is the opposite of good, and entails the violation of community standards of behavior, whether God-given or human-designed. Evil often includes injury of another person. The torture and murder of Matthew Shepard was clearly evil. But are the men who killed him "evil"? That isn't clear.

Although one of the accused men, Henderson, came from a broken home and was raised by his grandparents, an ex-girlfriend described him as kind and gentle, incapable of violence. Indeed, many Laramie residents knew and liked him. They spent hundreds of hours with him in ways that expressed their care. He joined the Boy Scouts, and became an Eagle Scout. Is this person evil? If so, what does that say about those who tried to impact his life? Characterizing him as evil implies a negative judgement against the community -- the very community that saw the problems and tried to help.

Perhaps the language of disease works better than the designation of evil. Disease attacks a person's well-being and causes some part of the body or mind to work wrong. If someone is sick, they can't help what they do. They are no longer responsible and thus not to blame. Who heals sickness? Doctors and nurses. Sick people are placed where these professionals can look after them.

The difference is that evil is a crime against the community, while sickness applies to individuals. While we can treat their sickness, what can be done for the entire community?

Perhaps the religious category of sin provides a workable strategy for dealing with the impact of the Shepard case. While the media talked about disease, many Wyoming residents talked about sin. The language of sin, like the language of disease, entails a way for the wrong to be fixed. "Fixing" takes place not by oneself, however, but through confession within the community -- by seeking forgiveness and taking the blame and the responsibility for one's actions.

But forgiveness cannot just be requested, it must also be given. The community needs to forgive. And in Wyoming, even during the initial shock, calls for forgiveness came from many segments of the state, including the gay community. This is important, for by forgiving, the community helps heal itself. It heals not just the sinners, but the society damaged by its proximity to the crime.