As I have suggested earlier this Sunday is the first Sunday in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany is a season in which we celebrate light and the coming of the light in Jesus. It is a season in which we celebrate and look for the ways in which Holy Mystery, the God who is love is manifest, made real, in our lives and in our world. Therefore, it is a bit surprising that the creators of the Spill the Beans lectionary invite us to use this Sunday to consider the matter of evil in preparation to, three weeks from now on January 27, commemorate International Holocaust Memorial Day. Not that I have any problem with commemorating the Holocaust. Even though the Holocaust event occurred more than 75 years ago in the times before I was alive it is important to remember that the Nazi Reich of Adolphe Hitler found ways to kill more than six million men, women and children just because they were born Jewish. It is these times of rising hate and hate speech it is perhaps more important than ever that we remember and commemorate the Holocaust.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus casts out a demon of muteness and restores a man’s ability to speak and perhaps to hear. The crowd that witnesses this at first celebrates the accomplishment and what this means for the man. But then an argument breaks out. Is this an act of God and of goodness or is this done by the power of Beelzebul, the ruler of demons and a betrayal of God? It is a challenge for me to imagine how restoring speech and perhaps hearing might somehow be evil and not of God. Ultimately Jesus actions and example are calling people to the way of God and goodness.

In the other reading from Nehemiah the prophet and governor had discovered that people are using the hardship created by a famine and starvation to exploit those who are hungry and desperate in ways that take them deeper into poverty, debt and enslavement. They are charging them crippling interest and taking away their land. These people are their kin. Nehemiah is outraged by this behaviour and demands that it stop. He points out that it is evil and against the will purposes and desires of God who wishes prosperity and wellness, fullness of life for all, not just for some. The people hear Nehemiah’s demand, consider it and change their ways.

As part of my preparation for ministry I did a Canadian Urban Training module, C.U.T. As part of the module, I was required to spend a weekend on the streets without any money. I had serious difficulties with the ethics and dishonesty involved in doing this. My classmates, one of whom was Mark Wartman, a former minister of Highways and then minister of Agriculture in the Saskatchewan government also had difficulty. Perhaps for the same reason or for reasons of their own most of my classmates had difficulty with this requirement. Mark and I were both assigned to do our plunge in Prince Albert. This was in early May.

It turned out that Mark had more life experience than I and was more street smart. He probably still is. He found employment at the Avenue Hotel Pub. I just walked the streets. By the Saturday night my spirits were pretty low when I bumped into Mark. Mark suggested that with the tips he had received we use the money and go to a movie. Who was I to argue? This was the spring of 1977 and the movie we went to was called Wizards. According to the internet it still is. It is a sci-fi animated story set in the future millions of years from now. The earth has been destroyed by nuclear weapons and whatever human survivors there are have mutated as a result of radiation poisoning to the point they are unrecognizable. The demise of humanity has allowed the re-emergence of elves, fairies, wizards and magic. On a extraordinarily dark and stormy night the Queen of the fairies gives birth to twin wizards both very powerful. One named Avatar, is a wizard of magic and goodness the other named Blackwolf, a wizard of technology and evil. When their mother dies. Blackwolf plots to take over his mother’s kingdom but Avatar the wizard of magic and goodness fueled by his grief over his mother’s death is able to defeat him and Blackwolf is exiled to the outer ruins where he discovers a projector and reels of Nazi propaganda films which with his magic power he enhances and turns into a psychological weapon that he uses to make war on his brother. Magic and goodness suffer repeated defeats to the point where they are on the verge of complete defeat. They assemble one last very inferior army with which they mount one last battle which is a decoy to allow Avatar to locate and confront Blackwolf. In the encounter Blackwolf taunts Avatar saying he has grown old and weak and should accept defeat. Avatar concedes this is a possibility but says he has one last bit of magic revealed by their mother that he wishes to show Blackwolf at which point he pulls out a revolver and shoots Blackwolf killing him. With Blackwolf dead his weapons and armies disintegrate and the land of the fairies, elves and magic is safe.

It was an interested movie to see and reflect upon in an interesting context and led to some interesting theological reflections and conversations.

The United Church and its predecessor denominations has long taken evil very seriously. In a New Creed which we embraced in 1968 we say, “we are called to be the Church, to celebrate God’s presence, to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil,” I think in 1968 I was more than a little naïve about the pervasiveness of evil. I was fourteen years old and perhaps we all were.

In a Song of Faith, we say this about evil, that which injures, hurts and destroys, which we describe as sin,

We surrender ourselves to sin,

a disposition revealed in selfishness, cowardice, or apathy.

Becoming bound and complacent

in a web of false desires and wrong choices,

we bring harm to ourselves and others.

This brokenness in human life and community

is an outcome of sin.

Sin is not only personal

but accumulates

to become habitual and systemic forms

of injustice, violence, and hatred.

We are all touched by this brokenness:

the rise of selfish individualism

that erodes human solidarity;

the concentration of wealth and power

without regard for the needs of all;

the toxins of religious and ethnic bigotry;

the degradation of the blessedness of human bodies

and human passions through sexual exploitation;

the delusion of unchecked progress and limitless growth

that threatens our home, the earth;

the covert despair that lulls many into numb complicity

with empires and systems of domination.”

The holocaust was and remains an expression of absolute evil. As faithful followers and disciples we must remain firm in our commitment to resist evil in all its many forms. We must remain firm in our commitment to be compassionate even when it may not seem to be in our personal best interest. For this is how love is known and shown and the God we know and meet in Jesus, the light of the world, is made manifest.