



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lillian Daniel: Welcome to *30 Good Minutes!* We're so happy to have you with us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I'm Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I'm Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite, President of Chicago Theological Seminary. She's going to talk to us about what it means to be "good" particularly as an entire community.

Lillian Daniel: We also welcome back, Michael Siegel, senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, with a reflection about the blessing of diversity.

Lydia Talbot: And we begin with a spiritual profile of Azam Nizamuddin, a young Muslim and passionate advocate for interfaith dialogue and understanding. Azam is an attorney and teaches courses in religion at Elmhurst College. This is a glimpse at his spiritual journey.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Azam Nizamuddin: I think of myself in a multi-faceted way. My religion is Islam, my family hails from India, and I happen to be an American lawyer. All three of those characteristics comprise who I am. I come from a pretty traditional Islamic upbringing. We moved here when I was about five. I just remember growing up I wasn't able to eat the same things that my friends ate because in Islam we have dietary restrictions. As I got older I was on the basketball team, varsity tennis, and played in band, so there was a social element to all that and it was very common for dating to go on and kids to get together and go out and have fun. That's something we weren't permitted to do. There is no premarital dating in Islam. For me, it was part of growing up as a Muslim in the United States.

I went to Loyola University and wound up majoring in theology. I may have been the first Muslim to ever major in theology at Loyola University! Many people ask me why on Earth would you major in theology, particularly at a Catholic institution. And my response would be, you know, you live in a predominately Christian society and Christianity is one of the largest religions in the world, how is it possible for you not to even be curious to know this other tradition and this other faith? How could you not want to know?

My wife's name is Asma. We were introduced through a mutual friend of our families. Back in those days you had people who would introduce young couples. The clear message that I had growing up from my family was that having a God centered life was central to your growing up.

Our prayers are based on a certain time period in relation to the sun. It's difficult because I might have court in the afternoon sometimes and I just can't get up and leave. After September 11th, I received calls and I must have given over one hundred lectures since then about Islam. By knowing about your faith and being part of American society, I think it produces a much more harmonious understanding of who you are and where you fit.

I got together with a group of people and we started an elementary school that focused on not only math, science, etc., but also providing good quality Islamic education. Right now our school, Averroes Academy is kindergarten through 6th grade and it's operating out of a mosque in Northbrook called the Islamic Cultural Center, but we've bought some property and we're going to build it from the ground up. It's going to be pre-k to 8th grade. We start off our day, everyday with the Pledge of Allegiance and then a recitation of the Holy Koran.

America is a country of different traditions, cultures and religions. And I think that's why one of my heroes has always been Thomas Jefferson because he really appreciated the fact that we are a religious country but we can't use any particular person's faith and impose it on others. There are new cultures and traditions and religions that can make America even a better place than it has been. And I hope to participate with my fellow Christians and Jews and others in making America the ideal place to live for everybody.

INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: Azam Nizamuddin is active in the National Conference for Community and Justice and other organizations that promote peace and understanding between people of all faiths. For more information, you can go to our website at 30goodminutes.org. Thank you, Azam, for sharing your story.

Now, let me tell you about today's speaker, Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite. She is the president of Chicago Theological Seminary, associated with the United Church of Christ. Susan is a prolific writer. You may have seen her occasional editorials in the Chicago Tribune or read one of her weekly articles for WashingtonPost.com. Dr. Thistlethwaite is the author or editor of twelve books and has been a translator for two translations of the Bible. We're delighted to have her with us today on *30 Good Minutes*. Welcome, Susan.

MESSAGE

Susan Thistlethwaite: Thank you so much, Lillian. I am really pleased to be here.

For many years I have taught a class called "Good and Evil." After a few years of teaching on that difficult topic, I began to notice that the "Good" part of the class was getting longer and longer. This is not because I (or the students) have really found evil any easier to understand, but because it is very hard to come to terms with the nature of goodness. Most of the time, people focus in on evil because, while evil repels us, it also attracts in a voyeuristic sort of way. Evil can mesmerize you. It can be so mesmerizing, in fact, that it can blind you to the fact that the only way we can really know something is evil is because we have a vision of what goodness is. We know evil because it is the absence of goodness.

I always start this discussion of goodness with the book “Lest Innocent Blood be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There” by Philip Hallie. Hallie is a Jewish ethicist and he writes of having been driven almost to despair, almost to suicide, by his studies of cruelty, especially cruelty in the Holocaust. He started searching for examples of goodness and he heard of an isolated village, Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, located about 40 miles outside Lyon in southern France.

Over four years, two years under the Vichy government and then another two under the Nazi occupation, the people of Le Chambon hid hundreds of Jews and smuggled many of them to safety outside France and into Switzerland. The Chambonnais were not members of the French resistance; instead they practiced a deeply committed, non-violent form of resistance to the Nazis.

So, why did the people of Le Chambon decide to be good when the vast majority of France, and indeed Europe either cooperated actively or passively with the Nazi onslaught? This is the question Philip Hallie asks in his book and it is a critical question with which to begin any study of goodness. There are many philosophical treatments of goodness: Aristotle, Plato, Kant, Martha Nussbaum who teaches down at the University of Chicago. But the thing about Le Chambon is it's not a theory. As the Hallie book title indicates, goodness actually happened in Le Chambon. What made those people have the courage to be decent in the face of organized cruelty and widespread violence?

Now, first of all, many of the people of Le Chambon and their key pastoral leaders were Huguenots. Huguenots were a small Protestant sect in what was primarily Catholic France. They were used to the idea of resistance because they had been persecuted four centuries by the dominant Catholic government, even since the 16th century. A Huguenot pastor of Le Chambon had been burned alive in 1529.

Second, those like Hallie who have studied Le Chambon describe the courageous pastoral leadership of Andre Trocme, the pastor who had come to Le Chambon six years before the war. Trocme was a committed pacifist and when he arrived in Le Chambon he started an international pacifist school in that village. Eduard Theis, another pacifist pastor, became the principal of the school. These two led the congregation in the practice of aiding refugees and in learning the principles of pacifism, long before the Nazis showed up.

The people of Le Chambon had already practiced being good. Indeed, when the war came, the pacifist Trocme actually offered his resignation to the congregation. Now they promptly rejected that and they kept their pastor.

There is no doubt that it was Trocme's convictions that formed the religious connection between the resistance to the evil represented by the Nazis and being faithful to good, faithful to God. But Trocme's theology, in fact, changed over the course of this very difficult work. At the beginning of the war, Trocme believed strongly in the power of God, the power of God to directly change the world. The strains of the work, the actual threats to his life seem to have caused him to re-think God's absolute power. Trocme was forced to go into hiding for months when after the Allies landed in North Africa, the Nazis moved into southern France into the Vichy area and they began a much more active persecution at Le Chambon. While Trocme began to doubt the

power of God, he stayed a life-long pacifist and ultimately he became the head of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

The practical work of resistance to evil was in fact accomplished by a mixed group of people. This is indeed why I thought when we were talking about diversity this would be an interesting way to get into the topic of why diversity to the good. Yes, there were the deeply believing Protestants, pastors and congregation, the smaller group who called themselves the "Darbyites," a Protestant sect in the town of Le Chambon who had a particular respect for the Jews as the "people of the Book", the Jewish refugees themselves who were not only sheltered but who were active participants in this work of sheltering other Jews, and atheists and communists. Magda Trocme, the wife of Andre Trocme, is presented in a book and in a subsequent film as an atheist who just does what needs to be done with a humanist conviction that the preciousness of life is an ethical end in itself.

I have visited Le Chambon. Got on a plane, rented a car, drove up to Le Chambon, up the side of this mountain and I went to the church where Trocme preached. It has the words over the door: *Aimez-vous les Autres*, "Love One Another." Loving one another seems straight-forward, but it's not simple and it's not that easy.

Out of studying Le Chambon and all these years of teaching good and evil, I've come up with six main lessons to be taken out of this study about what helps people be good as a group. First of all, it's important to realize that *religious faith and the government do not go together all that well*. You may recall that the Huguenots had a habit of not getting along with the primarily Catholic French government, so they were inclined to go along with the Vichy government in any case. Secondly, for people to be good, you need *courageous pastoral leadership* if people are going to get the message that resistance to evil and injustice is a primary goal of faith.

Thirdly, people need to *practice being good*. Remember, I said that the people of Le Chambon had practiced sheltering refugees years before there was a Nazi occupation or even the Vichy government. When you practice being good in some things you will be ready when there are bigger challenges that show up. Fourthly, the power of God. *The power of God is not absolute*. We ask ourselves, why didn't God prevent this tragedy? Why did God let this happen? But, in fact, that is to misunderstand the power of God. Rather, the power of God comes about through human cooperation and courage. Fifth, for goodness to happen in a community, *people with diverse convictions have to cooperate* to achieve a greater level of decency. Everyone doesn't have to be a person of faith, or of the same faith, for the work of shared goodness to go on. Christians, Jews, different sects of Christianity, atheists, communists all cooperated in Le Chambon to bring about the work of goodness. And finally, *being good is risky business* in a world where there is a lot of evil around. Trocme survived. Not all of the leaders survived in Le Chambon. Some died in concentration camps.

Now, the people of Le Chambon were not angels. In fact, they themselves are the first to say that they were not extraordinary in any way. In interviews for the documentary on Le Chambon, *Weapons of the Spirit*, many of the people of Le Chambon express surprise that anybody could even be interested in the fact that they helped out some folks who needed to be helped. Their example, however, is all the more important because they are just ordinary human beings who practiced being good.

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you'd like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or download the text anytime. Now here again is Susan Thistlethwaite. Susan, your wonderful story about the people of Le Chambon in southern France who hid hundreds of Jews during the Holocaust. That kind of resistance—the movement conveyed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*—against Hitler from the perspective of the outcast, the reviled, the maltreated. Where can you point to examples of that kind of resistance today in our culture?

Susan Thistlethwaite: Well, that's a really interesting question, Lydia. I think a highly contested issue in our time is that of immigration, for example. And while you do not have the immigration and naturalization agents actively trying to kill people, you do have family lives at stake, human lives at stake. And I will use this example and you and I will probably hear from listeners who say, "Well, people are here illegally," and so forth. But one of the things that I believe as a Christian and as a pastor, you always have to lift up. There is a higher law, there is a higher law. And I think it is important for people of faith to be good citizens, to obey the laws, but we have to always ask, at least ask the question: where is the higher law?

Lydia Talbot: Where does the danger of Manichaeism that dualistic philosophy that divides the world into good and evil, how does that fit into all of that and what's the danger of that kind of attitude?

Susan Thistlethwaite: I think if you listen to people of Le Chambon, one of the things you realize is they didn't particularly think they were all that "good." And that more than anything else is very instructive because what I observe today is a very distressing tendency among, not only Christians but a wide range of people of faith, who are saying, "I'm all good and all the evil is over there."

Lydia Talbot: Us against them.

Susan Thistlethwaite: Us against them whoever they are. And I'm telling you, as soon as you say that, that's an invitation for the devil to just jump up and bite in the back! You don't get the fact that you're not all good. You've got some vulnerabilities, you've got some of your own stuff going on here. And also it makes it very difficult then to bridge good and evil, to find solutions that are non-violent.

Lillian Daniel: Now, it's interesting though because you made the point that the people of Le Chambon were practicing goodness already and resistance, and yet we would never have heard of them if it were not for this iconic moment in history, the Nazi occupation, that has in retrospect become this sort of litmus test for good and evil. It is the moment in time by which we judge communities of faith as faithful or unfaithful. When we look at what the key issue is of our day, if it's immigration or not, how do you know you are right? How do you know that is the right moral issue by which you'll be judged 40 years hence? And are there spiritual practices or tools that help you to discern that?

Susan Thistlethwaite: Well, one of the most important things I think you can take away from the Le Chambon experience and understanding it is, first of all, there were Nazis who knew what was going on in Le Chambon and they looked the other way. Somebody told Trucme you're going to be arrested. So that even in the icon of evil, the Nazis, there were people who were not cooperating, who were not participating as fully as they might be stereotyped as doing. So that's one. But the other is, finally you don't know, Lillian. And that's where your religious community comes into play. But it was very interesting to me that the people of Le Chambon—this is a very isolated farm village. I left Lyon, rented my little car and drove. It was a very nice day in Le Chambon when I got there. It was snowing by the time I got up the hill. It is isolated and I think that helped them because they were able to hide people better around in these farms. But one of the things that they didn't isolate themselves from was one another and they didn't isolate themselves even from the Jewish members of the community and from the people who were not believers and so forth. So they practiced a kind of community discernment. It's not that the communities cannot be mistaken either and we have many examples of that. Whole countries can make mistakes. But I think that the more you open yourself to the idea, A, that you can be wrong, and B, to the insights of others, you have at least a chance of better discernment.

Lydia Talbot: We have about 15 seconds. Susan Sarandon spoke at your commencement address a few years ago, said, "Chicago Theological Seminary rocks!" How is it rocking today?

Susan Thistlethwaite: How is it rocking today? Well, it's just full to the seams! We're having to teach in the cafeteria. And we have wonderful young students, so it's exciting there. You need to come back, Lydia.

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Susan.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

Lydia Talbot: And now we turn to our friend, Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, with a final thought on diversity as a gift from God.

REFLECTION

Michael Siegel: Reciting a blessing is one of the best ways to express gratitude and acknowledge the presence of God in the universe. Our Rabbis created a blessing for every occasion imaginable. There are blessings for natural occurrences such as hearing thunder or seeing a rainbow. There are blessings for people as well; whether for a king or someone you have not seen in a long time. There are even blessings for seeing a person who might appear different from the norm. It reads: "Praised are you Lord Our God, Ruler of the Universe who creates differences in the creation."

What is the purpose of such a blessing? So often differences are feared and bring out the worst in people. By acknowledging that diversity is part of God's larger plan, we are given the opportunity to see the person and not that which makes them different from us. Ultimately, that may be the greatest blessing of all.

CLOSING REMARKS

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Michael, and our thanks again to Susan Thistlethwaite, Azam Nizamuddin, and you for joining us today on *30 Good Minutes*. I'm Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I'm Lillian Daniel. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at *30 Good Minutes*, may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.