

## **A Summer Services Sermon by Don Barber , June 15, 2025**

### **“The Critical Importance of Thinking, aka Confronting Your Banality”**

Good morning. I suspect many of you have been pondering how to navigate Trump taking us to fascism. What is happening in our country and what will become of us? To put my bias right out front. I read left wing magazines like The Nation and Mother Jones and I listen to independent journalism on WRFI. These sources often speak to these subjects, which I freely admit greatly influence my perspective.

After I volunteered to give a summer talk, I heard an interview by Elizabeth Minnich on Letter & Politics hosted by Mitch Gildrich of KPFA, rebroadcast on WRFI. Mitch started the conversation by sharing his profound disconnect with his grandparents over their acquiescence to Japanese Internment Camps. He pointed out how creating concentration camps right in their community runs counter to the values he learned from them. They justify their behavior by saying, “That just the way it was”. And when he pressed them more about the moral issues, they said, “That’s not how we thought of it”. Minnich proposed that maybe they were so focused on the attack on Pearl Harbor that they did things they wouldn’t normally do. They were part of something -the US response to that attack. When they said, “We [the government] never meant any harm,” it was probably hard to say in hindsight, but at that time it was probably accurate. It is, however, neither an adequate explanation nor excuse. What will history say about our response to today’s events?

So, I listened to the podcast and got Minnich Book “the Evil of Banality”. This title may sound a lot like Hannah Arendt’s famous book “the Banality of Evil” which was about the Nuremberg trial of Adolf Eichman. Minnich was a student of Arendt, but created a different analysis, hence the title reversal. Minnich suggests that it’s not that evil requires banality; rather the lack of reflective, critical thinking allows evil to happen. Eichman was accused of creating concentration camps with gas chambers and the system to round up the Jewish population. He was perceived as the devil. But during Eichman’s trial his politeness and wanting to please the court was evident. Minnich finds Eichman a typical bureaucrat, excellent at his job of planning and organizing. When on the witness stand, he conveyed, in his mannerisms and answers, that he was not a terrible monster; just an excellent administrator trying to please his superiors. So, he was just followed orders to organize the terrible cold-hearted genocide of a people. Minnich concludes that Eichman was ordinary rather than extraordinary. And that the ordinary can become a conduit for evil which he was oblivious to because he was just doing his job. Hence the evil of banality.

Banality is not an everyday term so I’ll share how I’m using it to mean thoughtlessness, ordinariness. It’s pretty sobering that seemingly ordinary people do commit evil. Minnich

builds from there, but it got me thinking about fascist regimes both past and present and how they come to power and require banality to inspire ordinary people to inflict so much harm. I suspect many of you have heard about Phillip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment where college students of equal stature take on the roles of prison guards and prisoners. The results of this experiment are frightening and eye-opening to show that all of us are so near the tipping point to perform acts that deliberately harm others. Ordinary people become willing and able to do thoroughly nasty things to others, even their friends. This experiment structure was an authoritarian set with students taking prescribed roles. It makes me think about how, in our capitalist economic system, our lives are often controlled by authoritarian situations. We are trained by and subservient to authoritarian figures to obey authority. In other words, we take on and play the role we are given. At this point, I knew I had a subject to more deeply explore and share with you. What is our thought process? And how are we using it?

As I mentioned at the beginning. I am frightened by the encroaching fascist state. It's no secret that fascism is growing in the US. It started long before Trump. Many say the barbaric colonialization of native Americans, others point to the slave economy, and others to the robber barons who used their economic power to attack democracy and human rights. All of this is done under the name of capitalism.

How can a minority population pull this off? How is it happening to us today? I'll suggest that fascism requires an "us" and "them" paradigm. I'll call these groups tribes. How many were there at the No Kings tribe convention yesterday? Those not in the No Kings tribe are "the Others". We are daily exposed to both the language of those in our tribe and the language of "the Others". Both sides use insider language to label "the Others". That insider jargon often is designed to change people's perceptions, feelings, and actions toward "the Others". For example, each side has outlandish conspiracy theories identifying someone as part of a plot against us and our tribe. Language about "the Others" is often preceded by references belittling, primitive, depraved, lazy, corrupt, degrading not only an individual but their kind which can be labeled by race, ethnicity, class, sex/gender, religion, and mental capacity. This labeling language is used so often that it allows things to become normalized. Case in point, Reagan's Evil Empire and GW Bush Axis of Evil. Both presidents used "the Other" language to create monsters and devils. I should take a moment here to mention that the tribe we are in may have different members depending on the issue. Think about Mitch Gilrich's grandparents being on the internment camp side and then later with their grandson on the side that would oppose such action. Insider jargon helps us quickly gauge the tribe at that moment. To be more aware, I/we should continually evaluate language for code words and make a conscious attempt to resist those terms' ability to stifle critical thinking.

Let's think about insider jargon. It prefigures the world for us without our ever noticing. Insider jargon like clichés, technical terms, scientific, political, military, economic, psychological, religious categories can function as entrance requirements to our attention. Thus, someone becomes an ADHD kid, a friend who gets fired becomes a loser, a generation becomes millennials, a nation becomes the enemy, unhappy families become dysfunctional, or destroying communities in the pursuit of more profit becomes creative destruction. There is so much we do NOT need to think about once we use the right insider jargon. And there are so many people who will reward us with their attention if we use code words that show we are insiders too and ready to chat safely within the fences of our proud, shared expertise. This has become quite normalized. We are all experienced at receiving and possibly perpetuating these messages. Fascists don't want free and open public discourse. Unlike their democratic opponents which say diverse opinion is healthy. The fascists seek to destroy or at the very least hobble what it considers hot beds of inquiry and free thinking like institutions of higher learning, many law offices, all media that won't know how, especially independent media, and of course science.

How does this demonization of democracy and free thinking take place in a country which just a year ago was labeled as the beacon of democracy? Why would most members of one political party fall in lockstep with fascism? I will suggest that each republican must choose individually for their careers, their status, their ambition, their connection with people in power, and of course money – all in competition with their moral compass and working for their constituents. Where is their critical, reflective thinking as the current administration rolls out actions so out of the ordinary that it makes many speechless. Yet party loyalists remain blind.

Fascism requires banality to be able to blindly follow. So, banality, thoughtlessness, rote unthinking action spread with minds that are not allowed, by their owner, to think reflectively, with curiosity. Nazism took hold in Germany during an economic recession when ordinary Germans, doing their ordinary tasks, were fed Aryan race messages of exceptionalism and that their plight was caused by a conspiracy of Jews: "the Others". This was the public message. They could justify this as their reality because it stoked their ego that they were good and honorable people who deserved better. How much different does this sound for us today? We are fed lines about exceptionalism- MAGA- most powerful country- largest economy- largest military- etc. and the reason this hasn't translated down to our reality is that "the Others" -immigrants- are invading and taking over our country. And this can only be solved by the deportation of blacks, brown skins from the global south, Asians, and DEI which gives the undeserving a leg up.

You can stop me here. I am using code words about fascism and MAGA. How am I acting different from “the Others”? In truth, I’m not. I am a member of the tribe that makes MAGA the Others. I think those Others want to end democracy and are installing an authoritarian form of government. So, I think MAGA members have conspiracy theories about a whole host of issues that are blatantly false to me. They say my tribe has unfounded accusations as well. We are all susceptible to the pressures that produce banality. We are all capable of being on autopilot, not continually challenging ourselves to reflective, analytical thinking, of being curious. Maybe it’s human nature to want banality. Our chance to rise above it is to adopt the discipline to internally challenge banality to make our actions align with our values.

I think about what could be going through the minds of military personnel called to impose a rogue administration’s will on its citizens? And I think about how I will respond when faced with a confrontation? Will I be able to carefully analyze the situation to be able to take effective and strategic actions?

Banality- Thoughtlessness- extraordinary shallowness-is not stupidity, but a lack of curiosity. Banality, then, is the failure to be attentive to and reflective about what we are doing. Yet I think I can make the case that banality is something we fall into because it’s easier. It keeps us from seeing through categories and labels. We use categories when we state our career and status. We can be caught in the banality snare when we desire to be on the winning side, desire to be close to people with power, pursue status, press ambition, seek wealth? It’s so easy and almost required to focus on the job we are tasked to do and not look at its impact on the broader world.

Now think about how we get information on global, national, state, and local stage; including the political party we support? To resist banality we need to know the truth? Think about social media and search engines and the algorithms that feed us a single ideology, reinforcing our tribal tendency and constricting our information sources so we can’t really know the truth? Not exposing ourselves to different thoughts gives us no reason to think reflectively and deeply. We are all vulnerable to banality. I criticize Fox as only a propaganda entity whose role is to create and alternate reality and squelch the need for reflective thinking. And yet I go to Google which is doing the same for me.

It’s clear that there is a plethora of disinformation or half-truths out there. I don’t use social media, but this media appears to be another means to manipulate/influence our thoughts. Can we properly classify propaganda and set it aside to not take up mental space? To counter, I/we need to have a healthy skepticism of all information sources. Are we isolated

from the truth because we aren't receiving all the information or is the construction of our daily lives and conversation such that we aren't able to absorb it?

As much as we might rather not admit it, we usually are aware that we don't know the whole story. But to know the whole story and do the reflective and critical thinking takes hard work. So, we find ways to not do that deep thinking, and effectively not to care, which translates into a lack of action to live into our values. We justify not doing this hard thinking by using terms like: "not taking it home with us", being a team player, it's not my business, or just doing my job, and the ultimate cope out- everyone seems to be okay with it. All these responses are given when we choose banality. Now at least, with the awareness of the intended effect of code words, I can start the discipline of being curious to their intent.

We are all, in varying degrees, practiced in avoiding awareness of things that might divert us from our tasks, irritate us, trouble us emotionally, challenge us morally. We practice allotting our attention daily. If we don't, it's hard to do our job, focus on a friend or child, or learn a new skill. This control of our thinking is our daily decision process. When times are changing, we need tools to not be led around with unreflective assumptions. This discipline can make the difference between doing good or evil.

Here's an example for all of us. How is it possible to avoid thinking about what we are doing? We know the harm our use/dependence on fossil fuels and plastic causes to humans or flora, fauna, ecosystems. As we think about what is happening to our planet, maybe we're not that much different from Eichman. Being radically out of touch with what one is doing even as one continues to do it and sees its impact. To counter I/we need to make it a conscious practice to gauge our actions and thinking with our moral compass. We are going about our daily lives with rote, repetitive processes when at any moment we can be startled back to needing to think about what is going on around us that is not aligning with our values. How will we reconfigure our lives when this happens to us? Because it is happening in profound ways to everyone living in the US right now.

The pressures of human life and toil both emotionally and physically make each of us susceptible to the many banal avenues discussed today. The slide into banality makes us vulnerable to being changed in ways we didn't mean for ourselves. I've now come to realize that how we think and avoid thinking is a moral question. Jobs don't exempt us, paychecks are not a moral pass, our tribe is not always right. We know this because we have seen and are now seeing ordinary people doing horrible things backed by these excuses. The activity of consciousness and awareness will attune us to the world and others. And we can't develop consciousness without deep and careful thinking about aligning our actions with our values.