

“The Greater Good”

The rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
March 5th, 2017©
2nd Sun. in Lent/Amistad Sun.

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

[The Apostle Paul wrote,]

Everyone was going to be punished because Adam sinned.

But because of the good thing that Christ has done,

God accepts us and gives us the gift of life.

Romans 5:14

Let us pray... O God,

We are like Adam & Eve, therefore prone to sin and capable of evil,
but you have also made us with the potential to be like Christ.

When we are faced with the challenges of painful situations,
guide and help us to choose the greater good.

Amen

Throughout history, Jesus of Nazareth has been characterized by the Church
as a glorious, supernatural being, yet remote,

gilded by layers of Church tradition – and domesticated by it.

He has been portrayed as a celestial king, enthroned and surrounded by angels,
whose main concern seems to be the proper observance of ritual and tradition –
much like the Pharisees he *opposed* in his day,
'God's will be done', bad behavior like human slavery notwithstanding.

However, beginning with the Reformation in 1517, people began to question
such a monolithic worldview of Christ and Christendom –
especially in light of the discovery of the New World,
rediscoveries of knowledge from the classic era,
and the invention of new technologies – like the printing press.

From the Age of Reason of the 17th and 18th Centuries CE on into our present day,
believer and skeptic alike, have sought to find the 'historic Jesus'.
Modern theologians of the Jesus Seminar have been part of this initiative
and have done a pretty good job in their efforts to demythologize Christ,
separating his humanity from his miraculous and otherworldly qualities.

Writers who tried to justify Christ by appealing to reason and natural law –
while emphasizing his wisdom teachings, opened the door for critics
to dispute or just ignore the divinity of Jesus.

Yet despite those who sought to discredit Christianity completely,
Jesus' words and deeds survived such scrutiny through the works of
Thomas Jefferson, Albert Schweitzer, and such Jesus Seminar scholars
as Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan, and Walter Wink.

Even as his harshest critics endeavored to break Jesus Christ down,
there was still something there, still something to be found...

Willard, p.2

In the meantime, why should the devil get the benefit of the doubt and escape from being demythologized, too?

It would seem only fair to break down the powers of evil as well.

For a start, the word, "Satan", literally means 'enemy' –

that divisive and self-destructive enemy of God and humankind.

Walter Wink equates Satan with what he calls the 'Domination System' – institutional evil as an impersonal, diseased spiritual mechanism.

This 'enemy' is not to be confused with "people who have been enemies to us" – for even when some people become evil, they are no more than people which means they have the potential for reconciliation.

The power of evil is derivative, being reinforced by fear and intimidation;

Having the appearance of legitimacy, the nature of evil is parasitic.

Evil follows its own logic with pain at its source.

So, rather than simply being random acts of violence or depraved indifference, evil is always in response to some pain.

To overcome evil, that pain must be addressed,

and the greater the evil, the greater the good that must arise to overcome it.

The form evil can take in human relationships is sado-masochism,

which combines sadistic suppression of others *perceived as a threat*

and masochistic surrender to those *perceived as a threat* –

so both sadism and masochism are fear-based.

Coercion is the defining characteristic of groups that have become diseased as evil – just as compassion defines healthy group relationships.

Though sado-masochism is the way cults operate,

any social organization including religious groups can be tainted by it.

Love on the other hand, is not derivative,

but love has its own narrative and can stand on its own.

The power of love defies logic; for example: to love one's enemies –

again, because God has written into all persons the potential for reconciliation.

Love demands equals, mutuality, and respect, and love is unwilling to cooperate in any relationship that is less than that.

You can't make somebody love you, because love can only be by choice

and that is its power as a building block for healthy, 'beloved' communities.

I talked with Margarita Romo this week to see how the people of her community are coping with all the changes in laws about immigration.

I learned there is a lot of anxiety right now among the people of Calle de Milagros, and she is advising her people to get their papers in order

in case they are arrested and put on trial.

That includes a letter instructing those in authority

about the care of their children should they be deported.

Willard, p.3

She told me that it is as if the government is saying to the Mexican immigrant,
“You are just a small piece of the Greater Good” – in other words, insignificant.

It was something she said – with resignation and some bitterness...
It is with irony, that I realized my sermon title today is ‘The Greater Good’.

Perhaps we need to clarify what the Greater Good should mean.
To me, that means:

the greater the evil, the greater the good that must arise to overcome it.
The Greater Good for us these days is to remember that we are all in it together –
we are all in this life together, we are all in this society together.

The white majority’s freedom and prosperity are connected
to that of the minority in our society’s midst.

There can be no peace or justice, freedom or prosperity, opportunity or hope
without caring for everyone in our midst.

I believe that the murder of John the Baptist evoked a response from Jesus –
of fear and pain, which gave way to the healing humor of irony,
generosity, and eventually his bold commitment to face the cross
and show the way to glory for us all...

Matthew 14 tells about his defiant response to the terrible event of John’s death,
even as a mockery of those first three temptations that he faced
at the beginning of his ministry, at the end of a 40 day fast

Hear the story as I tell it, inspired by Matthew 14:1-33

**WHEN HEROD ANTIPAS THE POTENTATE
HEARD ABOUT THE FAME OF JESUS, HE SAID TO HIS SERVANTS,
“THIS IS JOHN THE BAPTIST!
HE HAS BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD!
THAT IS WHY THESE POWERS ARE AT WORK IN HIM!”**

**FOR HEROD HAD SEIZED JOHN AND PUT HIM IN PRISON
ON ACCOUNT OF HIS BROTHER PHILLIP’S WIFE.
FOR JOHN HAD SAID TO HIM,
“IT’S NOT LEGAL FOR YOU TO BE SLEEPING WITH HER!”
AND HEROD WOULD HAVE KILLED HIM FOR THIS,
BUT HE WAS AFRAID OF THE PEOPLE
BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED JOHN WAS A PROPHET...**

**BUT ON THE GALA OCCASION WHEN HEROD’S BIRTHDAY CAME,
THE DAUGHTER OF HERODIAS BELLY-DANCED
IN THE MIDST OF EVERYONE.
AND HEROD WAS PLEASED, TO PUT IT POLITELY;
SO MUCH SO, THAT HE SAID WITH AN OATH,
THAT HE WOULD GIVE HER WHATEVER SHE MIGHT ASK FOR...**

Willard, p.4

PROMPTED BY HER MOTHER, THE GIRL SAID,
“GIVE ME THE HEAD OF JOHN THE BAPTIST –
HERE ON A PLATTER!”

AND THE KING WAS SORRY,
BUT BECAUSE OF HIS THOUGHTLESS OATHS
AND HIS POWERFUL GUESTS, HE COMMANDED IT TO BE DONE.
AND SOMEONE WAS SENT TO DO IT.

JOHN WAS... BEHEADED IN THE PRISON.
AND HIS HEAD WAS PLACED ON A PLATTER
AND PRESENTED TO THE GIRL –
AND SHE GAVE IT TO HER MOTHER!

WHEN JOHN’S DISCIPLES HEARD THIS,
THEY CAME AND TOOK HIS BODY AND BURIED IT.
THEN, THEY REPORTED THIS TO JESUS.

AND WHEN JESUS HEARD THIS... HE WENT AWAY FROM THERE,
SAILING IN A BOAT FOR A DESOLATE PLACE,
TO BE ALONE...TO PRAY.

BUT WHEN THE PEOPLE HEARD THIS,
THEY FOLLOWED AFTER HIM ON FOOT
FROM THE SURROUNDING TOWNS.

AS JESUS WAS GETTING OUT OF THE BOAT,
HE SAW A GREAT CROWD WAITING FOR HIM ON THE BEACH...
AND HE HAD COMPASSION ON THEM AND HEALED THEIR SICK.

AS IT WAS GETTING LATE, HIS DISCIPLES SAID TO HIM,
“THIS IS A DESOLATE PLACE
AND THE DAY IS ALMOST OVER.
SEND THE PEOPLE AWAY SO THAT
THEY CAN STILL GET TO THE VILLAGE
TO BUY FOOD FOR THEMSELVES.”

BUT JESUS SAID TO THEM,
“THEY DON’T HAVE TO GO AWAY.
YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT!”

THEY SAID,
“WE HAVE NOTHING HERE!
EXCEPT...FIVE LOAVES OF BREAD AND TWO FISH.”

Willard, p.5

JESUS SAID TO THEM,

“BRING THEM HERE TO ME.”

AND HE TOLD THE CROWDS,

“SIT DOWN ON THE GRASS!”

THEN, HE TOOK THE FIVE LOAVES OF BREAD & TWO FISH

AND BLESSED THEM AND BROKE THEM

AND GAVE THEM TO THE DISCIPLES,

WHO GAVE THEM TO THE CROWDS.

AND THEY ALL HAD SOMETHING TO EAT –

AND THEY WERE SATISFIED!

AND THEY TOOK UP TWELVE BASKETS

FULL OF BROKEN PIECES LEFT OVER.

NOW THOSE WHO ATE NUMBERED

SOMETHING LIKE 5,000 MEN – THOUGH THEY NEGLECTED

TO COUNT THE WOMEN & CHILDREN.

THEN SUDDENLY,

JESUS URGED THE DISCIPLES TO BOARD THE BOAT

AND GO AHEAD OF HIM TO THE OPPOSITE SHORE,

WHILE HE DISMISSED THE CROWDS.

AND WHEN HE HAD SENT THE CROWDS AWAY,

HE WENT UP THE MOUNTAIN, TO BE ALONE, AT LAST TO PRAY.

MEANWHILE, THE BOAT WAS MANY LEAGUES OUT,

BUT STILL FAR FROM LAND, BEING BATTERED BY WAVES

CAUSED BY AN OPPOSING WIND.

[AND THE WORD FOR ‘WIND’ IN BOTH HEBREW AND GREEK

CAN ALSO MEAN ‘SPIRIT’.]

AND ABOUT FOUR O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING,

SOMEONE WAS COMING TOWARDS THEM –WALKING ON THE SEA!

SO WHEN THE DISCIPLES SAW SOMEONE WALKING ON THE SEA,

THEY WERE TERRIFIED, SAYING,

“IT’S A GHOST!” AND THEY HOWLED WITH FEAR.

BUT WHOEVER IT WAS CALLED BACK TO THEM,

“HAVE COURAGE! *I AM THE ONE WHO IS* COMING TO YOU!

DO NOT BE AFRAID!”

Willard, p.6

**THEN, PETER THE ROCK ANSWERED HIM,
“LORD – IF IT IS YOU,
CALL FOR ME TO COME OUT TO YOU ON THE WATER!”
AND WHOEVER IT WAS SAID,
“COME ON!”
AND HAVING CLIMBED OUT OF THE BOAT,
PETER THE ROCK WAS WALKING ON THE WATER,
AND CAME TO... JESUS!**

**BUT SEEING THE STRONG WIND, HE WAS AFRAID;
AND BEGINNING TO SINK, HE CRIED OUT,
“LORD, SAVE ME!”**

**INSTANTLY, JESUS REACHED OUT HIS HAND AND CAUGHT HIM.
AND HE SAID,
“HAH! O BACKSLIDING BELIEVER... HOW COULD YOU DOUBT?”**

**AND AS THEY CLIMBED INTO THE BOAT;
THE OPPOSING WIND CAME TO AN END...
IN THE BOAT, THEY KISSED HIS FEET, SAYING,
“TRULY, YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD!”**

Jesus was tempted to turn stone into bread –
but he turned bread into more bread.
He was tempted to jump off a building –
but he walked on water instead.
He was tempted to compromise who he was –
but he responded with generosity, courage, and faithfulness.
Jesus creatively responded to the challenges of his life –
as we should do as well.

Amen

Our lesson today from Romans 5:12-19 describes the problem of 'original sin' and how Christ was the solution...

- ¹² Adam sinned, and that sin brought death into the world.
Now everyone has sinned, and so everyone must die.
- ¹³ Sin was in the world before the Law came.
But no record of sin was kept, because there was no Law.
- ¹⁴ Yet death still had power over all who lived from the time of Adam to the time of Moses.
This happened, though not everyone disobeyed a direct command from God, as Adam did.
In some ways Adam is like Christ who came later.
- ¹⁵ But the gift that God was kind enough to give was very different from Adam's sin.
That one sin brought death to many others.
Yet in an even greater way,
Jesus Christ alone brought God's gift of kindness to many people.
- ¹⁶ There is a lot of difference between Adam's sin and God's gift.
That one sin led to punishment.
But God's gift made it possible for us to be acceptable to him, even though we have sinned many times.
- ¹⁷ Death ruled like a king because Adam had sinned.
But that cannot compare with what Jesus Christ has done.
God has been so kind to us, and he has accepted us because of Jesus.
And so we will live and rule like kings.
- ¹⁸ Everyone was going to be punished because Adam sinned.
But because of the good thing that Christ has done,
God accepts us and gives us the gift of life.
- ¹⁹ Adam disobeyed God and caused many others to be sinners.
But Jesus obeyed him and will make many people acceptable to God.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil.

² And he fasted forty days and forty nights,
and afterward he was hungry.

³ And the tempter came and said to him,

“If you are the Son of God,
command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

⁴ But he answered,

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city,

and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ and said to him,

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down;
for it is written,

‘He will give his angels charge of you,’
and

‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”

⁷ Jesus said to him,

“Again it is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain,

and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them;

⁹ and he said to him,

“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him,

“Begone, Satan!

for it is written,

‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

1 Thessalonians 5

^{13b}Be at peace among yourselves.

¹⁴And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray constantly, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit, ²⁰do not despise prophesying, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good, ²²abstain from every form of evil.

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁴[Christ] who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.