

“Sacred Violence”

The Rev. Drew Willard
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UCC at The Villages
Palm/*Passion Sunday*

Luke 19:28-41

Luke 23:32-49

*Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, and said,
"Certainly this man was innocent!"*

Luke 23:47

Let us pray... O God,

Help us recognize that – even when we are so sure we are right,
we can still be wrong.

And when we are treated wrongly, show us how to love and forgive, too.

Amen

Easter is practically here – and for children, it's like Christmas morning
except they're looking forward to getting an Easter basket.

Instead of Santa leaving gifts, the Easter Bunny leaves a basket full of goodies –
and don't forget the chocolate rabbit and a hunt for painted eggs.

The kids' perspective of these holidays carries its own enchantment,
believing this world can still hold surprises of good fortune.

Encouraging a sense of wonder is entirely appropriate for a child's development –
but the meaning of such 'holy days' can get obscured

when its symbols get hijacked to sell merchandise

and when it becomes domesticated as a politically correct “Happy Holidays!”

The bunny and candy don't have much to say about the true meaning of Easter –
but to some extent that's also true about how we Christians observe Easter.

We Protestants tend to jump from a joyous Palm Sunday

to a joyous Easter Morning with Maundy Thursday as kind of
a speed bump of spiritual sobriety.

The Maundy Thursday “Tenebrae” service is a solemn observance,
rather than a celebration, reminding us that

Christ was arrested, tried, and condemned to death.

Beyond that, it is rare for Protestants to do a Good Friday Service –
the observance of when Jesus was crucified.

Next thing you know, it's Easter Sunday when we get up early to

watch the Sun come up, and maybe have some chocolate from the basket
before going to Church and singing,

‘Christ the Lord has risen today. Alleluia!’

Generally, though, we skim right by that inconvenient part of the Christian story –
which is the death of Jesus on a cross.

Willard, p.2

I must admit it is perplexing to come to an understanding of why the Son of God, was treated so disrespectfully and violently killed.

It just doesn't seem to make sense – yet it is a story which continues to be told, generation after generation.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

John 3:16

You would think it would be enough just to know that God so loves the world, but this does not explain why the Son of God had to die.

Traditional Christianity tells us that Christ died *for* our sins – either to appease a God who can only look upon perfection, or to ransom humanity from the devil's oppression; but what if Jesus died *because* of our sins?

What if those sins are something we can do something about because of what Jesus did?

What if he died to expose what we do on a regular basis to each other?

What if God means for us to begin to recognize this and – with God's help through Christ, begin to change ourselves and the world?

We live in a society that seems to be disintegrating into increasingly violent incidents.

The most basic response to this is *lex talionis* – ‘an eye for an eye’, the limiting of revenge through retributive justice.

When everyone is in a free for all, competing for limited resources, punishing a scapegoat has been the way

for societies to keep things from spiraling out of control.

To identify a scapegoat as a sacrificial lamb and to expel or execute them, calms things down, but only until the next time.

This ‘single victim mechanism’ – as anthropologist Rene Girard calls it, is how societies restore order as an authorized “sacred” violence.

We can easily see this mechanism at work in our enemies like the self righteous Taliban brutalizing their own people in the name of Islam.

But as Americans, we are blind to our own ‘sacred violence’, waging wars to get Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein – which we did, though thousands upon thousands of deaths have followed and there is yet to be peace.

Even Christians in this country's history have turned a blind eye to lynching, gay bashing, and the killing of abortion doctors.

Willard, p.3

The crucifixion itself is an example of sanctified violence –

but Jesus' death on the cross has provided the lens for seeing this
for what it is – this 'single victim mechanism' of scapegoating.

Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind"

and Martin Luther King said our choice is, "Non-violence or non-existence".

Their words have meaning for us, because – like Christ,
they shared that bitter cup of martyrdom.

Like Christ, they were killed by those who were blinded

by their own self-righteousness from seeing their victims as innocent.

We live in a culture of violence – it is in our movies, our music,
the current events of our news, as well as our history.

In the classic western, "Stagecoach", John Wayne as the Ringo Kid
is on a mission of revenge to kill the murderers of his family.

It ends with a showdown of 1 good guy against 3 bad guys –
where the good guy prevails.

But in real life,

this kind of violence escalates to a never-ending cycle of revenge.

We may celebrate the hero who wins in such circumstances,

but in real life the odds are stacked against the Ringo Kid.

He usually dies anonymously – a victim of the competition of all against all,
until a single victim serves as a scapegoat,

keeping everyone blind to what the powers that be are really doing.

In the Nine Principles of War taught at West Point,

the principle of 'Offense' calls for 3 to 1 odds in the attack.

Therefore, warfare, by its own definition, is a cowardly act,

in contrast with the heroics of the Ringo Kid –

or Jesus Christ for that matter,

who take their stand, 1 against 3, outnumbered and courageous;

But Jesus more so, because he engages in conflict, unarmed.

With that element of 'sacred violence' where a hero brings about fatal retribution –
as well as an epic battle with the Apaches along the way,

"Stagecoach" is similar to the founding myths of civilizations and
the sacred stories of world religions.

But it is the Gospel story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection

in the context of the Hebrew scriptures, that we find a counter myth,

an alternative story, to the way human beings have always

compromised for a false peace.

Willard, p.4

In the story of Jesus, the hero is the victim who bravely faces overwhelming odds,
is treated with abuse, and shamefully killed,
but who resolutely rises from death to forgive and
even love those who killed him.

Love and forgiveness are the way of Christ – the true hero's path,
prevailing even against death.

Though the crucifixion is a harsh part of our tradition we may prefer to avoid,
the cross of Christ anticipates a victorious achievement.

All of us have a cross to bear of some kind,

but part of the Good News of the crucifixion is we don't go it alone.

As burdensome or humiliating as that personal cross may be,

we don't carry it alone, because we have a God who has suffered like us,
and by whose example, we can anticipate joy ahead.

Christ returns to show us the world is bigger than we know,

that life goes on beyond our own experience and beyond life on earth itself.

Christ is our companion in bearing the load, no matter how burdensome or unjust,
and our example to guide us making our judgments in the world –
and these are reasons, not only for hope yet to come, but joy now.

We can't change the world, but we can *begin* to change it,

at least our part of it by setting a good example ourselves.

Sometimes, we're the accusers rather than the accused,

because we can't escape having to make judgments in this world, too.

But we have Christ's example to help us become a courageous example ourselves,
by forgiving and loving, even our enemies.

Lex talionis – 'an eye for an eye' leaves the whole world blind to the fact
that we are all in this world together.

There's a phrase I learned this week from the news – a simple phrase in Hebrew,
that our president used in speaking to some Israeli college students:
"Ateh lo la-vahd", "You are not alone."

Wherever you are on your life's journey –

even if you are broken down on the side of that road of life,

stuck in a hospital bed, or isolated by infirmity or finances or fear,
or caught in troubled relationships, you are not alone.

Whatever the cross is that you carry, you are not alone.

Nobody rides into town on their white horse and solves all the problems –

except the way Jesus did, mocking the powers of evil,

by riding a gentle donkey and being just as stubborn as a mule
to forgive and to show love.

Amen

Luke 19:28b-41 [RSV]

[28] ... [Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

[29] When he drew near to Beth'phage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples,

[30] saying, "Go into the village opposite, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat; untie it and bring it here.

[31] If any one asks you, `Why are you untying it?' you shall say this, `The Lord has need of it.'"

[32] So those who were sent went away and found it as he had told them.

[33] And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

[34] And they said, "The Lord has need of it."

[35] And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their garments on the colt they set Jesus upon it.

[36] And as he rode along, they spread their garments on the road.

[37] As he was now drawing near, at the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen,

[38] saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

[39] And some of the Pharisees in the multitude said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples."

[40] He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."

[41] And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it...

Inspired by Luke 23:32-49

Now, two others – criminals,

 were also led away to be killed with Jesus.

When they all got there – to the place called ‘The Skull’,

 they crucified him and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

And Jesus said,

 “Abba, Father, forgive them... because they don’t know what they are doing.”

Meanwhile, they divided up his clothes between them, playing a game of chance.

Now, people who stood by watching, mocked him, and the leaders, too, who said,

 “He saved others, so let him save himself!”

 “If you are the Christ – the Chosen One of God...”

And the soldiers, also, joined in the bullying,

 by offering him sour wine to drink and saying,

 “If you are ‘the King of the Jews’, save yourself!”

 because there was a sign hanging over him that read,

 “‘This is the King of the Jews’.

And one of the hanged criminals swore at him,

 “Aren’t you the Christ? So, help yourself – and save us, too!”

But the other one told him to shut up, saying,

 “Aren’t you afraid of God?

 We’re here for the same reason, and we deserve what we got.

 But this man did nothing wrong!”

And he said,

 “Jesus, just remember me when you enter your Kingdom.”

Then Jesus said,

 “I’m telling you the truth: today... with me... you will be... in Paradise...”

By then, it was about the 6th hour – about 12:00 noon,

 and clouds overshadowed the whole region until 3:00 in the afternoon,

 as the sunlight was fading.

 Suddenly, the veil of the Temple sanctuary was torn apart in the middle.

And crying out in a loud voice, Jesus said,

 “Abba! Father! Into your care... I entrust my spirit!”

 And saying this, he breathed his last...

Now, the soldiers’ captain saw this happen and praised God, saying,

 “‘This man really was innocent!’”

And the crowd which had gathered to see this, returned home, troubled.

 But those who knew Jesus – especially the women,

 who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, still watching.

Luke 23:32-49 [RSV]

- [32] Two others also, who were criminals,
were led away to be put to death with [Jesus].
- [33] And when they came to the place which is called The Skull,
there they crucified him, and the criminals,
one on the right and one on the left.
- [34] And Jesus said,
"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."
And they cast lots to divide his garments.
- [35] And the people stood by, watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying,
"He saved others; let him save himself,
if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!"
- [36] The soldiers also mocked him,
coming up and offering him vinegar, [37] and saying,
"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"
- [38] There was also an inscription over him,
"This is the King of the Jews."
- [39] One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying,
"Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"
- [40] But the other rebuked him, saying,
"Do you not fear God,
since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?
[41] And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds;
but this man has done nothing wrong."
- [42] And he said,
"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."
- [43] And he said to him,
"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."
- [44] It was now about the sixth hour,
and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour,
[45] while the sun's light failed;
and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.
- [46] Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said,
"Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!"
And having said this he breathed his last.
- [47] Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, and said,
"Certainly this man was innocent!"
- [48] And all the multitudes who assembled to see the sight,
when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.
- [49] And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee
stood at a distance and saw these things.