

March 15, 2014
Isaiah 53:4-6; 2 Corinthians 5:16-25
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Beard

Centered in Grace

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today we have two scripture readings - one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

The first reading is from Isaiah. Many of us will be familiar with the opening line, "Surely he has born our griefs," which is the section of Handel's Messiah that the choir will then sing. This passage comes from a time when the Jewish people are hoping for deliverance from the grief of exile.

The other reading is from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, a community deeply struggling with internal conflicts. The Corinthians wondered about atonement (at-one-ment), how to be at-one with each other and with God.

SERMON

One of the ironies of repentance and forgiveness is that what comes first is sin. Ah, sin. So pervasive, so problematic and so puzzling. The word itself comes from an archery term 'syn,' which means to miss the mark, to be off center. It is a tiny little word that has come to cover a

wide range of broken relationships.

Growing up, some of us spent a lot of time listening to religious professionals tell us that not sinning was primarily about being good at not doing certain things - like drinking and gambling and

lying. Maybe that's why we get an odd pleasure when we catch religious professionals at it, even in a story.

A priest, a minister, and a rabbi walk into a bar. They are in the back room gambling when the cops arrive and arrest them. At court the judge says to them, "You are accused of gambling. What do you say?" The priest prays silently, "Oh God! Only one little white lie and I'll never do it again." Out loud he says, "Not guilty." The judge lets him go. The same thing happens with the minister - silent bargaining with God, a public "Not guilty" and the judge lets him go. So the judge turns to the rabbi, who replies, "Gambling? With whom?"
(guy-sports.com, Yom Kippur)

I'm on jury duty this month. As I sat in the courtroom last Monday, I found myself pondering the complexities of our missteps, our desire for punishment (for others), our clever tactics for getting

off and the societal complexities of discerning justice. I also found myself wondering what it was like for Jesus of Nazareth as he was processed through the “court” system of his day, knowing that the books were already cooked against him.

Both the religious and the political authorities of Jesus’ day wanted him out of the picture. The religious authorities were angry at his practice of offering forgiveness directly to those who were considered sinners. In so doing, he was subverting the official process for forgiveness which required sacrifices in the temple. The political authorities were angry because Jesus’ followers saw him as a leader, even “King of the Jews.” This kind of leader had the potential to stir up the masses of an occupied people.

For both sets of authorities he was trouble. He was a rebel with a cause. He refused to participate in the sin-accounting business of the temple and the people-suppressing business of the empire. And the authorities executed him for it.

With the recent release of the federal report on the justice system in Ferguson, Missouri, we are reminded that the insidious dangers of cooked books are still with us. Many studies from around the country, which look at the records on legislative policies, policing, courts, and prisons show us that if you are poor and a minority in this country the odds are often against you.

Jesus’ experience in first century Palestine and present day injustices remind us that the sin we are up against is often not so much personal as it is corporate - systemic sin - the brokenness of a whole system of living. We see this kind of brokenness in the isms - racism, sexism, classism, nationalism, and the list goes on. This kind of brokenness gets passed from generation to generation. Often we are not even consciously aware of the power of systemic sin in our lives.

We are not perfect. Humans have an amazing and heart-warming capacity for compassion and also a stunning and heart-wrenching capacity for cruelty. Jesus of Nazareth lived fully in the complexity of this reality, just as we do. During the season of Lent each year we ponder the story of Holy Week - the arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. What was going on? In what ways are humans responsible for what happened and in what ways is God at work? There are no simple answers to these questions.

From those who look at life as if God is in control of everything, we often hear “Jesus died for our sins.” This usually means substitutionary atonement - that Jesus was a substitute payment to God the Judge. However, when this idea is pushed to its limits God begins to sound like Shakespeare’s Shylock, the proverbial loan shark demanding a pound of flesh. Or it makes God sound like a child abusing parent - giving up the son

- in some perverse need of judgment satisfaction.

In today's passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul takes a different perspective, saying that God is not primarily concerned with counting our trespasses against us, but rather with reconciling the world to God's self, opening up the possibilities of new life. This is a very personal concern for Paul who in his early life participated in persecuting Christians, yet had a change of heart and became one of them.

Jesus certainly died in the midst of human sin. In the crucifixion the human authorities said a great big NO to Jesus. They hoped that would be the end of it. As Jesus' followers scattered to the four winds indeed it looked like it might be. Might God have given up at that point?

But it was not the last word. God's saving and reconciling action comes in the resurrection with a great big YES. The resurrection is a sign that the Holy will continue to be with us even in the midst of our brokenness. The resurrection invites us back to the center, into the center of God's presence, a center full of grace.

How do we live out that grace in the midst of our ongoing human brokenness? I've been pondering that question in relation to an event from this last week.

As I suspect most of you know some University of Oklahoma fraternity

brothers (Sigma Alpha Epsilon) were caught on tape using racist and violent chants. The president of the University responded swiftly, saying, "This behavior is reprehensible and contrary to all our values." He then expelled the identified students and closed down the fraternity house on campus. My first response at hearing these actions was, "Good!"

This situation and the corresponding report on Ferguson and the juxtaposition of these things with the commemorative Selma march in Alabama this past week are chilling. We are ashamed. We are ashamed because we are reminded of the thin veneer over the racism that lives just below the surface so much of the time.

In Oklahoma, I wonder first what restorative actions need to be taken for the well-being of the students of color who have been maligned and frightened by what has happened? Are there further actions that the university needs to take to care for their safety – physically and spiritually?

I also wonder about the perpetrators. Is punitive action to be the last word to them? Shall we simply brand them with a capital R racist for the rest of their lives? Are there ways to engage them in repentance and restoration?

Are there ways to engage all of us in the ongoing work of repentance and restoration, both with accountability

and with grace, for the well-being of all people?

As I ask myself these questions, I trust in the promise of the resurrection - that we are invited back to the center, a center of grace and a center of commitment to the ways of the Spirit.