

April 14, 2019
Matthew 27:1-14
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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The Tide Turns

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

The sermon from the Celtic series that has generated the most conversation, at least among the clergy among us, was the sermon on Original Blessing. I talked about the Celtic perspective that what is deepest within us is of God. So, in response, someone asked me to talk about sin. The question is – If our original state is one of blessing - being created in the image of God - how is it that human relationships are often such a mess? What about sin?

Holy Week always brings us to this question. Holy Week is particularly startling to children as they begin to grasp the story. We've been telling them how wonderful Jesus is. How kind he is. How he shares God's love with all people. So, their question is always – *Why would people want to kill him?* Why is it that deep, profound goodness can be so frightening?

Today, we are going to read a passage that describes the collusion between the Jewish leaders, the Roman authorities, and Judas Iscariot that brought about the brutality of the cross. Leading up to this passage is the betrayal of Jesus' disciple, Judas. Jesus is arrested and taken to the house of the Jewish chief priest, Caiaphas. The disciple Peter has followed in the shadows, but is then confronted in the courtyard and three times denies being a follower of Jesus. The reading begins with the next morning.

SERMON

Waving palms today and putting out daffodils next Sunday, we ride the high tides of Palm Sunday and Easter. In between, the tide turns; and we find ourselves mired in stinking mud flats or left high and dry on jagged rocks.

We would like to avoid the coming days, but we cannot – for they are our story. Not only our story of long ago in the time of Jesus, but our story in the here and now.

Life is a paradox of joys and sorrows, of blessings and sin. Neils Bohr, a Nobel prize winning physicist, said that the opposite of a true statement is a false statement; but the opposite of a profound truth is often another profound truth. And that is paradox. And that is how the church has found itself talking about original blessing and original sin.

In the sermon on original blessing, I used the text from Genesis 1 which proclaims that we are created in the image of God and blessed by God. Yet, those early biblical storytellers had no illusions that life was a bed of roses. They knew about piercing thorns. In Genesis 2 we find Adam and Eve struggling with the choices life brings them. We see their quick tendency to blame others for their own actions. Sound familiar?

Then their son Cain succumbs to his jealousy of his brother Abel and murders Abel. What is it within us that holds such capacity for violence? And this is just within the family.

The biblical story tellers had no illusion about the profound paradox that we are originally blessed and yet quickly find ourselves in the mire of brokenness and sin. We ponder that which is within us that we can see even in children who often quickly convert a waving palm to a fighting weapon.

We are given the freedom to make choices and we struggle with those choices. The consequences of those actions cannot be undone and ripple through the generations. Therefore, future generations are not born into a clean slate. The systemic sin of the culture in which we are born, we pick up by osmosis. Sin is not only an individual choice; it is also the reality of all the isms we experience. So, we can see why some would be inclined to speak of original sin.

In Holy Week we confront the individual choices people made as well as the brokenness of the cultures in which they lived. As Jesus was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, emblematic of God's peace and blessing for all people, Pilate was at the opposite gate to the city parading in on a mighty steed with a military guard accompanying him, emblematic of power over other people.

Let's consider briefly the three characters mentioned in today's reading who are all part of the answer to the question – Who killed Jesus?

Pilate

Do you suppose Pilate and the Roman authorities were actually interested in this itinerant prophet, Jesus, or was the crucifixion just sadistic entertainment for an occupation troop, who considered Jews to be less than human anyway?

Caiaphas

Were Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders jealous or afraid for their community - or both? Were they afraid Jesus would cause so much disruption that there would be a backlash against the whole Jewish community by the Roman occupiers?

Judas

Judas was one of Jesus' inner circle. Why did he betray Jesus, and for money? Was Judas just jealous or was he trying to force Jesus' hand to act in a more overtly powerful way? Did he want Jesus to prove he was a powerful Messiah? Was he shouting - Show us you are the Messiah! Was it Judas' shadow side, as Jungians call it, flaring up, seeking power in the way of the world, trying to force Jesus' hand to display such power? Many in the Jewish community had dreamed that the Messiah would arrive on a mighty steed.

Jungians speak of the shadow side of our personalities – that part of ourselves that like a shadow we keep behind us so we don't have to look at it and even pretend it doesn't exist. But unattended to, it can lash out with a vengeance. Have you ever noticed that the people who bug you the most sometimes have characteristics in common with you? The shadow doesn't like to be brought into the light, but that's exactly what we need to do with it – in a safe place. Otherwise, evil gains power in the shadows.

I had an experience with Judas with a class one spring in Vacation Bible School. I wanted them to learn the names of the twelve apostles. So, I took 12 plastic eggs, and filled each one with the letters of the name of one of the disciples, so the kids would have to unscramble the name when they found it.

Then I took the eggs and hid them among the trees and shrubs in the yard of the parish house at that church. When the time came, the youth went out to find the eggs but when they returned, they only had eleven. They couldn't find one. Glibly, I said, *Well, we'll see who's missing.*" They opened the eggs, unscrambled the letters, and came up with the names of the disciples.

Then it hit me who was lost – Judas. I had not intentionally planned this, although that is a great idea. I even went out with them and looked and looked, but we couldn't find the other egg. Judas was lost.

There is that character to sin –

- being lost and needing to be found,
- being in bondage and needing to be set free,
- being broken by our own misdeeds and needing to be forgiven.

Judas, Caiaphas, and Pilate represent human actors in the Holy Week story, but some theologians have suggested that the ultimate answer to who killed Jesus is God. From this perspective, God planned for Jesus to die as an atoning sacrifice so that we could be forgiven of our sins.

I don't find that theology at all helpful. First of all, there is the ominous cloud of child sacrifice implicit in that perspective. In this view God is blood thirsty and vengeful. In other words, as Jonathan Edwards – an 18th century preacher - put it, we are sinners in the hands of an angry God.

This is antithetical to the witness of Jesus who acknowledged brokenness, who forgave often – time and time again, all the while proclaiming that we are in the hands of a loving God.

The crucifixion is the work of humans.
The resurrection is the work of God.

In the crucifixion we see sin.
In the resurrection we see grace and forgiveness.
But more about that next week.