

Guilford Community Church, United Church of Christ

Friday, 19 April 2019

Good Friday

Christian Scripture: Matthew 27:38-44 and Luke 23:39-43

“Juxtaposition on-top of Juxtaposition”

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On his way to Golgotha, Jesus was offered a draught of wine mixed with gall (Matthew 27:33-34). This was an act of mercy by whomever offered it to Jesus. It was an act of grace in the midst of unspeakable cruelty. You see, gall is a very bitter substance made from myrrh - which is a gum or resin from a tree. The presence of myrrh was actually a sedative, a benevolent means by which to ease pain. Jesus tasted the bitterness, understood it was anaesthesia, and rejected it. [I would have taken it and asked for more.]



Later, while on the cross, a bystander offered Jesus sour wine in a sponge raised to him on the end of a stick (Matthew 27:48). Another bystander mocked him then saying, “Let us see if Elijah will come to save him”. Again, an act of grace in the midst of cruelty.



The gospel of Luke records, not just any bystander, but a Roman soldier, offered Jesus sour wine saying, “If you are King of the Jews, then save yourself” (Luke 23:37-28). It seems as if we have a recurring motif: injury and relief co-existing simultaneously.

We have this dynamic of barbarity and beauty throughout the crucifixion story. Think of it. Simon from Cyrene carries the cross after Jesus can no longer do so following his collapse. The agony of Jesus’

mother watching her son die adjacent to his giving her away to the beloved disciple. The confession of the Roman Centurion, an executioner, declaring that Jesus “truly was the son of God”. And we have the two executed on either side of him, one mocking him and the other declaring him innocent and asking for salvation. While dying, Jesus had the capacity to forgive and love saying, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

We have juxtaposition after juxtaposition after juxtaposition - sweet and sour, wine and bitter, good and bad, cruel and merciful, evil and benevolent - all comingling, imbricated. Even at the end, amidst the stench of death, we have Joseph of Arimathaea, a dissenter of the Council that condemned Jesus, taking Jesus’ body and honouring it with a sacred burial. What wild juxtapositions! Perhaps the strangest one, though is that of the criminal, the zealot, the bandit, the guilty sinner at the last minute becoming reconciled with God and being promised unity with God through Jesus while dying a tortuous death. I’m not sure what greater contrasts can there be.

In the late 1930s, Abel Meeropol wrote a poem entitled “Strange Fruit” after he saw a photograph taken at the lynching of two African-American teenagers, Thomas Shipp, aged nineteen, and Abram Smith, aged eighteen. The poem describes the “overwhelming bloodlust

betrayal of humanity in the tragically beaten, burnt, and distorted bodies of African-Americans hanging from a tree of hatred”. They were both killed on 7 August 1930 in Marion, Indiana. A studio photographer named Lawrence Beitler went to the lynching, set up his camera equipment and captured the scene. The day after, he sold thousands of images as souvenirs for fifteen cents a-piece. The story is recounted that when the eighteen-year-old was hoisted-up, he struggled with his arms to free himself. He was brought down, his arms were then broken and he was hoisted back-up. The carnival like scene captured in images is sickening. So-called ordinary people cruelly carrying out an extrajudicial killing in a carnival and country fair-like atmosphere.

But, the story does not end there. A third young man named James Cameron survived the lynching. For reasons that are partially unexplained, perhaps it was because he was only sixteen years old, the mob did not lynch him. He served four years in jail and was released. James later said, “Since Indiana has forgiven me, I, in turn have forgiven Indiana”.

I wonder why James felt grateful to have been forgiven - as if he was deserving of being extra-judicially murdered. I actually cringe reading his statement. But, how dare I? It was *his* statement. He was free to offer it. When one contemplates the fate of James’ two

friends, James was innocent. For James to appreciate forgiveness and to extend forgiveness in this context is baffling to me. It is too much grace for me to contemplate.

Yet, there is an argument that the same occurred with the so-called criminal next to Jesus. John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg are quoted in a recent Richard Rohr meditation (Thursday, 18 April 2019) saying:

“Mark tells us that Jesus was crucified between two ‘bandits’. The Greek word translated ‘bandits’ is commonly used for guerrilla fighters against Rome, who were either ‘terrorists’ or ‘freedom fighters’ depending on one’s point of view. Their presence in the story reminds us that crucifixion was used specifically for people who systematically refused to accept Roman imperial authority. Ordinary criminals were not crucified. Jesus is executed as a rebel against Rome between two other rebels against Rome...”. In other words, they were as innocent as Jesus.

Thomas and Abram were executed and James was imprisoned by empire - a racist, white supremacist empire. Jesus and the two so-called ‘bandits’ were executed by empire - an imperial and militaristic empire. Yet, the unjust deaths of Thomas, Abram and Jesus are not completely devoid of light. At a fundamental level, their deaths

illuminate the utter and complete moral bankruptcy of violent empire. Secondly, in Jesus and James Cameron's cases, incredibly, forgiveness was offered and accepted. Despite the darkness, the light of righteousness cannot be overcome. The flame of one candle defeats a universe of darkness. James Cameron accepted forgiveness, just as the so-called 'bandit' accepted forgiveness. And James offered forgiveness, just as our Lord and Saviour offered forgiveness saying, "Today, you will be with me in paradise".

Friends in Christ, we live in political atmosphere that is morally bankrupt. The bombs of empire reign in Yemen through a proxy state - our military knows no limits. The laws of empire are bent so unrecognizably that there is no accountability for truth and no such thing as a fact. We live in an Alice in Wonderland of political incredulity.

Yet, the crucifixion narrative is mixed with sweet and sour - wine with bitter herbs throughout. There is great beauty, love, grace, and forgiveness mixed with gobsmacking lies, indifference and hatred. Yet, if we remain faithful to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ, we will in the end triumph over darkness with the divine light of a candle in our hand.

This was the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.