

Good Friday 2018 Sermon

Text: John 18:1-19:42

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... He was the source of life, and that life was the light for humanity.

“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” -*John 1:1-11*

That’s how John begins his Gospel. The Word of God, the source of life and light, was made flesh and came into the world, yet the world did not know him or accept him.

Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe wrote, “In the world we have made it is *fatal* to be human, to be *really* human, to be open and vulnerable to others, to be loving.” Jesus, God’s-love-made-flesh, is someone “our world perceives as a threat and reacts accordingly.”¹

Mennonite pastor Isaac Villegas comments, “Jesus died of human love, a love so true, so vulnerable, so fierce, that he shook the foundations of our world built upon sin. So they killed him. So *we* killed him—the Gospel of John implicates **everyone** in the death of Jesus... because his love threatened the stability of our world and of our lives.”¹

His love threatened the stability of our world and of our lives. How so?

Certainly Jesus’ love threatened the stability of the Jewish religious establishment. The Jewish religious system of Jesus’ day, by its very structure, put the Scribes and Pharisees and Priests above the common people, as being holier, and better, than the common people. Jesus, whose law was love, constantly criticized this system and the hierarchy which kept it going. He seemed to wait until the Sabbath Day to heal people – thus breaching Sabbath law. He called the Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders, “a brood of vipers,” hypocrites, blind guides, blind fools, whitewashed tombs that are beautiful on the outside but inside are full of dead bones and filth” (Matthew 23). In saying these things, Jesus was undermining not only the authority and reputation of these religious leaders but also the whole religious system which they supported and which supported them. The common people saw in Jesus someone who taught with **true** authority, from his heart and soul – in contrast to the scribes, whose authority relied upon outward structures of law without any inward integrity. (Mark 1:22)

Jesus was a threat to the **Roman** system of government, also, for the Roman Empire also relied upon laws imposed upon the people, and the officials who administered those laws (such as the tax collectors) often abused their authority for their own gain, to the detriment of the common people, who had no recourse. Jesus came preaching and inaugurating a different *kind* of kingdom, a kingdom “not of this world,” as we just heard in his discussion with Pilate, but rather a kingdom ruled by love, compassion, and forgiveness rather than by the subjugation of the Roman Emperor, who kept the people in line by the sword, violence, and the threat of such dire punishment as crucifixion. Even Jesus’ own disciple Peter, steeped – as everyone was – in the violent culture of his day, reacts to the soldiers coming to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane by drawing a sword and cutting off the ear of the high priest’s slave. Jesus has to admonish him. In the other Gospels, Jesus says at this point, “all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” (Matt. 26:51-52)

Herbert McCabe was right in saying that “In the world we have made it is fatal to be... *really* human, to be open and vulnerable to others, to be loving.” It was true 2000 years ago, and it is still true today, as modern martyrs such as Oscar Romero, prove. Even many of us Christians in America today are tempted to believe that the solution to guns in schools is *more* guns in schools, violence met with more violence, because that is the world’s answer, and we swim in the ocean of this world’s culture and mindset – we can’t get away from it. We are not that different from Peter.

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his book *Pilate and Jesus*, suggests that the disconnect between Pilate and Jesus concerns the different focus each man has: for Pilate, the focus is judgment and justice; for Jesus, the focus is salvation. Agamben writes: “[Jesus]—who has come not to judge the world but to save it—finds himself, perhaps precisely for this reason, having to respond in a trial, to submit to a judgment, which his *alter ego*, Pilate, in the end **will** not pronounce, **cannot** pronounce. Justice and salvation cannot be reconciled. ...The world, in its fallenness, does not want salvation but justice. And it wants it precisely because it is not asking to be saved. As unsavable, creatures judge the eternal: this is the paradox that in the end, before Pilate, cuts Jesus short. Here is the cross; here is history.”²

We humans (like Pilate and the crowds beneath his window), who desire justice rather than salvation, end up judging the eternal; while the eternal, having been judged and condemned, offers salvation in the very process of his condemnation and death.

It is the kind of irony the Gospel-writer John revels in; it is why, for John, Jesus’ glorification occurs on the cross.

My friends, I believe that Giorgio Agamben is right: The world does not want salvation, but rather justice. As we have seen throughout our Friday night Lenten studies, we humans almost always lead with judgment, not acceptance; with “no,” rather than “yes.” In the kingdom of this world, our polarized world, things are either/or: good *or* bad, right *or* wrong, conservative *or* progressive, American *or* foreigner, Christian *or* Muslim, white *or* black – and on and on without end. But in the Kingdom of **God**, *Jesus*’ world, it is the opposite: Jesus leads with acceptance and love, not judgment. John tells us that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather to save it, heal it (John 3:17). In Jesus’ kingdom, his subjects are commanded to *love* their enemies, not *judge* them or *condemn* them – let alone treat them with violence. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us that God “makes his sun rise on the evil *and* on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (*Matthew 5:45*) Do you see how that flies in the face of the way *our* world, our society, runs? We *lock up* the evil and the unjust, or at least scorn and deride them; and (for the most part) we applaud the just and the good (and strangely, we always see ourselves as belonging to this second category of people!).

What would happen if we started treating evil and unjust people with the same amount of love and compassion with which we treated the good and the just? Why, it would undermine our whole system of laws and justice! What would happen if we Americans stopped promoting “America First” and instead lived out Christ’s teaching that every living creature is cherished in the eyes of God? What would happen if we stopped seeing each other as Democrats or Republicans interested primarily in **our** “side” *winning*, and instead banded together for the good of the whole? Is that not what Jesus would want? I doubt he would be at all interested in whether or not we write “In God We Trust” on our currency; he taught that we should have the love of God and neighbor inscribed on our hearts and lived out in our lives.

Pastor Villegas writes, “[Jesus] is a human life translucent with God’s love, transparent with God.

“And they kill him, *we* get rid of him, because our world can’t bear that kind of love. His life threatens to undo the lives we’ve worked so hard to make, to earn, to build. We are *accustomed* to this world that killed Jesus, to **our** world. Our communities **need** police, our nations need borders, our houses need locks, our identities need barriers.”¹

Who knows *what* would happen if our nation decided to start functioning according to Jesus’ New Commandment, given on Maundy Thursday, that we love one another just as Jesus loves us? (Jn. 13:34) What would happen to our 2-party political system? Our accustomed way of leading with judgment? And besides, every other nation on earth would start taking advantage of us, would they not? So it’s a good thing that Jesus isn’t around anymore, stirring things up, questioning our polarized society, holding up our corporate and personal lives for

examination. He might just cause so much trouble that we'd have to get rid of him. Again. Oh, we wouldn't *crucify* him; that's too barbaric. We'd probably just ignore him, or say, "We have separation of church and state. You keep **your** Kingdom, Jesus, and **we'll** keep *ours*."

"The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."

And so, today, we ponder the cross.

1 <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/guest-post/marielle-franco-and-crucifixion-love>

2 <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/clash-cultures>