

**Good Friday Homily, John 18:1 – 19:37**  
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, March 25, 2016  
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Reading this Gospel story is like removing the band-aid from a wound that needs to heal. I have a well-earned reputation for clumsiness, so it will be unsurprising to those who know me that I have some experience with band-aids. They can certainly be useful. You can put one on a bleeding finger in order to continue preparing a meal without contaminating the food. But if you leave a band-aid on for too long, the wound will never heal. The band-aid addresses a symptom, but it is not a cure. Eventually, healing requires exposing the wound to the air and light.

The Gospels tell us that the wound of sin is no different. The Passion narratives, in particular, bring our woundedness into the light of truth. They expose the destructiveness of our fears, without a filter. They reveal how these fears prevent us from becoming fully human. They take the band-aid off the wound and promise us healing, if only we will stop covering it up.

In order for the exposure to be effective, of course, we have to recognize ourselves in the wounded and wounding enterprise that is depicted. We have to understand and admit the attraction of the process that led to Jesus' suffering and death. Listening to the high priest is a good place to start. His idea is that it is "better to have one person die for the people" (John 18:14). If we want to continue covering our own wound, we will say that this logic is foreign to us, a strange ritualistic bloodlust of some "other" culture. Christians have done this a lot over the years. But if we desire healing, in the light of truth, then we should admit that the high priest's logic is actually quite familiar to us. Our own social arrangements often require the sacrifice of victims. A community's sense of cohesion frequently depends on knowing where to draw lines of exclusion. For the sake of an "us," we regularly sacrifice the humanity of "them." And certainly our desire for peace and security requires victims. In our day, these include drone-strike victims, or victims of gun violence, or would-be immigrants, or Syrian child refugees. We may call some of their suffering tragic, but we often tell ourselves that it's still better that some should suffer for the sake of the security of many.

But the God who made "all things visible and invisible" cannot be satisfied with the sacrifice of even one Syrian child for our sense of comfort. Idols demand sacrifice, precisely because they are not invested in the victims. They did not make these victims, so their suffering becomes a small price to pay for the sake of "the people." By contrast, the God whom Jesus trusts is on the side of the victim. This God is the creator of all would-be victims. This God is on the side of Jesus, and by extension, of all those we might otherwise sacrifice to our need for security.

The Passion narratives expose our sacrificial logics, our "it's-better-to-have-one-person-die-for-the-people" arguments, for what they really are—fearful responses to the truth about our lives. And the truth about our lives is this: we are not self-made. We are not our own authors. We are not able to guarantee security for ourselves. We cannot amass enough money, enough powerful friends, enough popularity, to really *matter*, in the infinite way we want to matter. No arsenal of weapons can make us into the true source of life. No condemnations of others can really give us control over reality. No border walls can keep death at bay. We are just pretending.

But we don't want to know that we are pretending. So we collaborate with each other in our untruth. When the reality that our lives are rooted in God's generosity and not our own power begins to suggest itself in the back of our minds, we assert our own power with still more emphasis. We find others with whom we can congratulate ourselves on our efforts. We build systems of esteem and admiration, hierarchies of power that seem to justify our quest for control. We build fires out of our insistence that we can only trust our own accomplishments; and then like Peter we warm ourselves by these fires. We pay allegiance to our collective idols and emperors, fighting the truth that our lives are a gift and not an accomplishment. We fight it so hard that we become unsure if there is anything called "truth" to begin with.

And then, when someone comes along who doesn't heed the system we have set up to make ourselves feel secure and in charge, we see him or her as a blasphemer. We are "astonished" at such a person, as the disciples so often are at Jesus. And eventually, we want to be rid of them. We cannot tolerate the idea of a

person who trusts the Creator for their life, because it reveals that our own efforts to control our fate are self-deceptive and unnecessary. We cannot tolerate a person who relies on God rather than the fantasy of control, because we have invested so much energy in this fantasy. We cannot trust a person who gives up the quest for self-importance, because we have not learned to stand on the power of God, our maker. So we call the trusting one “self-important.” We call *him* a blasphemer, an idolater. To maintain our comfortable falsehood, to stay warm by the fires of our own making, we banish the truth.

Pilate does not want to banish Jesus, at least in the beginning. He does not recognize Jesus as a threat. He says repeatedly that he finds “no case against him” (19:6). Jesus has no power, as Pilate understands power. He won’t even defend himself, and he has no mob standing with him. He is not a “dangerous” man, in the sense that he is not a credible rival for Pilate’s power. But slowly, Pilate begins to recognize in Jesus a different kind of threat. He begins to feel afraid. Not because Jesus suddenly reveals some extra, reserve power that Pilate respects, but because Jesus exposes Pilate’s own claim to power as empty and fearful. Here is a man, Jesus, who does not fear what he cannot control—because he trusts in God, not his own power. Here is a man who does not seek the power Pilate seeks, and yet who lives anyway—by the power of God. Here is a man who treats the power to kill, on which the system trades, as less real than the power to give life, which belongs to God alone. Here is a man who does not play Pilate’s game, and who therefore exposes it as just that—a game. Here, then, is a man who must be put to death, for no other reason than that he tells the truth, about us and about God.

Well actually there are some other reasons given by his accusers: blasphemy, and disloyalty to the emperor. But the text wants us to recognize these charges as self-justifying nonsense, at least in the way they are used. We want our violence to be warranted; we don’t want to see it as the product of empty fears. So we find reasons. “He should die because he claims to be the Son of God,” the people say (19:7). This scares Pilate, but not enough to put Jesus to death. So the people clarify: “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor” (19:12). Now Pilate gets it. Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God is not some delusion of a religious nut, which might be a little dangerous but not deserving of death. Instead, it means that Jesus does not need the approval of the crowd. He does not need the approval of the emperor. He does not need the human system’s gold star of achievement. His joy is not dependent on this kind of recognition. For Jesus, happiness, or in the Bible’s language, “blessedness,” does not derive from the trappings of empire. He does not aspire to whatever the system tells us to aspire to. He will not despair if he does not have the latest products or the richest friends, because he knows the true source of blessedness. This is the simple truth of what it means to be a Son of God. And this is what Pilate recognizes. If Jesus wants to make *everyone* a son or daughter of God, then the system really is in trouble. Imagine, Pilate must be thinking, if everyone lived this way! Trusting in God for their happiness and not in the approval of the crowd, the system, the emperor! He gets it now. He is exposed by this simple man, who trusts God as a parent. Pilate himself is scared to be a son of God. He wants his identity to be derived from the approval of the crowd and the emperor, which are really the same thing in the text. He wants to continue relying upon the trappings of empire; he wants to forget that they are also the trappings of fear. He doesn’t want to know that they are not reliable, that their end result is arbitrary violence, not life.

The Gospels are unique among religious myths, but not because some special figure is put to death. In fact this happens in lots of myths. They are unique because the way they tell the story leaves the persecutors totally exposed. Jesus dies only because our fear is idolatrous and demands victims. *This is the band-aid coming off*. The arbitrary nature of our violence is the point. It’s what we need to recognize—that our efforts to secure our lives by our own power, in the face of what we fear the most, are inevitably destructive and self-defeating. We assert ourselves because we have concluded, wrongly, that only *control* will make life trustworthy. Once we see clearly how this wounds us rather than saving us, we are free to imagine a new possibility. We can now see our lives from Jesus’ perspective, recognizing that though we are dependent, and limited, and mortal, still the one on whom we depend can be trusted. The love that authored us desires to make us daughters and sons. Even in the midst of our failure to trust the goodness of life, this love remains persistent. For this, he came into the world, to testify to the truth. Exposed to the air of this truth, our wounds may begin to heal. We may begin to see that our self-protective efforts are unnecessary. And, knowing that our lives are a gift, we can joyfully squander them in the service of others, trusting that it is God who sustains us, in every moment. May it be so.

