

March 4, 2018  
Lent 3 - Peter's Denial  
John 18:12-27

Ry O. Siggelkow

### “The Redemptive Love of the Cross”

“Love is the most durable power of the world.”

“The most astounding fact about Christ's crucifixion is that it . . . [is] the supreme revelation of God's love. It is quite difficult to see the love of God in such a shameful tragedy . . . . Certainly it requires penetrating eyes to see God in such a setting.”

- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Praying to the One whom he addresses with the words, “righteous father,” Jesus prays for his disciples in the 17th chapter of John: “the world does not know you, but I know you; and these [disciples] know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17: 25-26). After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out across the Kidron valley with his disciples to a place where there was a garden.

We are not given much description of this garden, but the author of the Gospel of John tells us that this was a place where Jesus and his disciples frequently met. Perhaps the garden was a place for theological and political conversation, for teaching, for collective study of the scriptures; perhaps it was a place where Jesus ate with his disciples, a common place of gathering, of refuge away from the strictures of the city. Perhaps, from the perspective of the powers of the world -- that is, through the eyes of the police and the religious and political establishment -- it was a place where criminals, addicts, prostitutes, alcoholics, homeless people, and gangs all “loitered,” spitting and swearing and doing other activities that “disturb the peace”; and perhaps for these reasons it was also place held as suspect by the elite of society, a place to be feared, a place that had wealthy and powerful people clamoring for increased police surveillance, for “law and order”; a place, perhaps, not unlike certain regions of our own city, occupied by a heavily militarized MPD. Perhaps it was also a place that garnered a great deal of sympathy from certain sectors of the city, from good-intentioned, justice-minded progressives who wanted to “help” the poor, who understood, at an intellectual level at least, some of the causes of the social problems that young poor people face, and perhaps the kinds of policies that could make the situation better for them and better for all, on behalf of “the common good.” Perhaps this garden, where the poor, dark-skinned Jesus gathered with his unruly, poor darker-skinned disciples was what we might call, a “ghetto.”

Of course I am taking some liberty to do a bit of imaginative work here, but it is not out of the realm of possibility, if we recall the company that Jesus kept and the family that he came from. And remember, Jews in the first century faced very limited options; for many the most urgent issue was simply the matter of survival. The social location of Jesus matters: born of wedlock to poor Jewish parents, on the run from the authorities, a Jew within the political context of Roman occupation. To understand Jesus's relationship to his disciples and his relationship to the violent, hostile world that surrounded him, we need to wrestle with the character of that world, which is not merely a historical or academic matter, but a pressing contemporary matter -- a question of everyday, ordinary life and the space it takes to freely live and breathe and move. It means that we must learn to understand the character of our own violent, hostile world, the one that we inhabit, in which we live and breathe, the one that makes a wide open space for certain people -- people who look like us, generally speaking -- to live and breathe and move freely. We must learn to understand that, at the same time, it is *this* world that creates conditions of closure for many others, a world that cuts off, locks up, shuts down, and suffocates, pushing the life out of others. (I am thinking here -- my mind cannot but help to wander -- of a particular man . . . 43 years old, a former horticulturist for the New York Department of Parks and Recreation, out of work because of health problems, and so had been selling loose cigarettes . . . or not . . . it really doesn't matter anyhow; but this particular man, a man with a family, a husband to Esaw, a father to six children, including a 3-month old; and to three other children, he was known as "grandpa" . . . I am think of this particular man, standing in front of a beauty supply store on a Staten Island sidewalk . . . and I am thinking especially of his last words that would soon be heard across the globe: "I can't breathe." You see, the social location of Jesus matters, and it matters because Eric Garner's life matters.)

The social location of Jesus matters, and it matters tremendously to those who stand, as Howard Thurman eloquently put it, "with their backs against the wall." But let us return to the scene in John, back to the garden, back to the confrontation with the police in the ghetto. In the verses that immediately lead up to our passage for today, we hear of Judas, described as the disciple who betrayed Jesus, rounding up the soldiers, together with the police, and the religious leaders; they came armed and ready, according to John, "with lanterns and torches and weapons" (18:3). And Jesus came forward, "Who are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Accepting his fate as a particular calling, given to him by the One he addresses as "father," Jesus concedes, "I am he" and tells the authorities that if they are looking for him they should let the others go. Now, one of this disciples, Simon Peter, the disciple whom Jesus knows will deny him, had a sword with him. He drew it and struck the high priest's slave, cutting off his right ear. Perhaps Peter was seeking to demonstrate his loyalty to Jesus and to his people, perhaps Peter was tired of being hounded by the authorities, perhaps he was tired of having his back against the wall. Perhaps he wanted to get free, perhaps he wanted to breathe again. But Jesus reproaches his zealous disciple: "Put your sword back into its sheath."

In response to this confrontation, to this violent act of rebellion against the authorities, the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrest Jesus and bind him up. Back against the wall, hands up, handcuffs, thrown into the back of a squad car . . . “you’re coming with us, you’re under arrest” they say. They drag Jesus to the authorities and it is at this point that we are told that Caiaphas, the high priest, was the one who had advised the Jews that “it was better to have one person die for the people” (18:14). What becomes clear or should become clear to us at this point, if we grasp the social location of Jesus and allow it to matter as we read and grapple with this text and this story, is that this is a lynching. Lynching is a mechanism of intimidation and social control; it is meant to create deep fear within a people, to terrify a community into obedience to the authorities and to the dominant power structure. Crucifixion is a form of lynching; it is a violent, reactive response to a people with their backs against the wall who are moving in the “wrong” way, who are seeking a movement toward freedom. In the first century, crucifixion was a way to show somebody -- and really to show a people -- that they are worthless and that their lives have no value. It was a death reserved for those whose lives were held in the highest contempt and in the lowest regard. As New Testament scholar Paula Frederickson puts it, “Crucifixion was a Roman form of a public service announcement: Do not engage in sedition as this person has, or your fate will be similar. The point of the exercise was not the death of the offender as such, but getting the attention of those watching. Crucifixion first and foremost is addressed to an audience.”

Now, Peter, probably scared to death at this point about what might happen to him, having a sense now of what is going to happen to Jesus, is the first to be questioned by the authorities. “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” *Are you with this guy? Is he your leader?* Peter denies his relationship to the man, “I am not.” In the tradition of reflection on Peter, he’s often given this bad rap, but, seriously, *what would you do?* I mean, why would you voluntarily turn yourself in to potentially face the same fate as Jesus? And, of course, their case against Peter is probably even greater at this point, since he cut off a man’s ear! Then, Jesus is questioned by the high priest and once again he does not hide his identity: “I have spoken openly to the world; I have taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.” Jesus, showing no respect to the authorities, is beaten by the police. “Is that how your momma taught you to talk to the police, young man?!” He’s thrown against the wall, handcuffed and bound up and taken away.

The authorities turn back to Peter, who is warming himself by the fire and trying not to make too much eye contact, and they interrogate him again: “You are not also one of his disciples are you?” Peter responds: “I am not.” Then, one of the men recognizes him from the earlier confrontation in the garden. He’d seen this man before, his relative had been the victim of Peter’s sword. “Wait, aren’t you the one who. . . I saw you in the garden with Jesus!” Peter again denies any relationship to Jesus for the third time, and just as Jesus had predicted, the cock crowed.

Now, those of you who are familiar with the Gospel of John know that the story of this disciple, Simon Peter, who denies his relationship to Jesus in this scene, is not over. Later on, Peter will be a witness to the empty tomb and his relationship to Jesus will be restored. What is important about the story of Peter's denial is that it brings into sharp relief the meaning of the cross of Christ and *the way of the cross* for Christian discipleship.

Peter's denial is not story of a failure of loyalty. In fact, it was Peter's steadfast loyalty to Christ that led to his passionate attempt to defend, protect, and secure the body of his Lord for the sake of freedom for his people. But Peter failed to understand that the body of Christ does not need his defense and the truth that Christ brings to the world cannot be secured by violent force. The truth of Christ is rather exhibited in his *refusal* to respect the authority and methods of the powers. What Peter failed to understand, in the words of Audre Lorde, is that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112). Peter had sought to protect and defend Jesus through violent force, he had sought to use the methods of the violent, hostile world. But in doing so, he was merely imitating the power of death, the way of the police and the soldiers. And it is *this* action that marked Peter's denial of Jesus. Peter failed to realize that the truth of Jesus is revealed in the redemptive love of the cross. What the crucifixion of Jesus reveals is that God does not fight the power of death with the power of death. God does not bring new life through violent force, but through suffering love. What the way of the cross reveals is that only love conquers the violent powers of death, only love brings forth new life, and only love creates the conditions in which one can live and breathe and move freely. In his identification with the lynched victim, the cross of Jesus represents the depth of the God's love for suffering humanity. In his refusal to fight death with death, the cross breaks the deadly cycle of violence rooted in fear and hatred of the other.

No one has better understood the power of the redemptive love of the cross and its significance for Christian discipleship than Martin Luther King. King taught us that nonviolence is more than a strategy; it's a way of life defined by love for others. Nonviolence is rooted in the conviction that love, not hatred and fear, is the only way to heal the brokenness of humanity. King's understanding of nonviolence was rooted in his belief in the redemptive love of the cross, the central theme of King's preaching and teaching. King's faith in the cross allowed him to love the people he knew were trying to kill him, following Jesus' example on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Yet, King had no "martyr's complex." He didn't want to die. "I'm tired of the threat of death," he proclaimed after protests in Chicago. "I want to live. I don't want to be a martyr. And there are moments when I doubt if I am going to make it through . . . . But the important thing is not how tired I am; the important thing is to get rid of [injustice]."

Loving white people was no easy task for King, especially in the wake of the death of four black girls in the bombing of the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham in September of 1963. It is one thing to believe in nonviolence and the redemptive love of the cross in the abstract, but quite different in the face of murdered children. The four murdered children reminded many black people of the lynching of Emmett Till and the fact that white Americans would seem to stop at nothing in their attempts to intimidate and subjugate African Americans. And yet, remarkably, in spite of the violence, King was convinced that “we must not become bitter; nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. We must not,” he said in his “Eulogy for the Martyred Children,” “lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided of them can learn to respect the dignity and worth of human personality.” King was willing to die not only for black freedom, but for the freedom of white people too. “If physical death is the price I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from the permanent death of the spirit, then nothing could be more redemptive.”

This past week marked the sixth anniversary of Trayvon Martin's death. And this coming week is the 53rd anniversary of Bloody Sunday, the day civil rights activists were beaten by police in Selma, Alabama. And just as black youth from all across the country worked for gun reform in the wake of the killing of Trayvon Martin, so too, the students of Parkland, Florida have mobilized people all over the country to speak the truth of love over hatred and fear and peace over violence.

“Righteous father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these [disciples] know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” May it be so. Amen.