

## A New Way To Live

Our evening adult study ended last week by asking this question: where is God most profoundly present?

The answer that we arrived at was that God is most profoundly present in the victim.

Now, don't get me wrong.

I'm not talking about the folks who go out of their way to become victims – whether through self-pity or a strange sense of trying to get one over on someone else.

I'm talking real victims.

Those who are at the heel end of social structures that do their best to squash certain segments of society.

Victims aren't rare or hard to identify.

Think of the American Indians, and Chinese immigrant workers and African Americans and our Micronesian friends whose homes were bombed to smithereens in the 1950s.

I took our son Joey to see the movie 42 last week.

The movie tells the story of Jackie Robinson, the first African American baseball player in the history of American professional baseball.

It is a powerfully told story.

It seems that the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers was a Methodist who was quite certain that God is also a Methodist!

Silly man, we all know God is an Episcopalian!

But this owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, for reasons of faith and a considerable interest in making more money, wanted to break the color barrier.

He needed the right person to do it: someone who was internally disciplined, someone who knew who he was, and someone who could withstand profound evil that was all but certain to be directed at himself, his family and his teammates.

Things like death threats against his baby boy and his wife.

As the film unfolds, this single black man becomes the catalyst for the long and painful lancing of the boil of racism –a boil that lay oftentimes just out of sight, at least in suburban America.

Over and over again, there are the crowds unleashing venom on a man simply because his skin is a different color: yet remarkably, the man won't return insult for insult, he won't return threat for threat, blow for blow.

Instead, he takes it in, at great cost: but in that taking in: the venom that racism is, once exposed, shows itself for the small minded embarrassment that it is; and the people caught up in its vileness see themselves, perhaps for the first time; and in the seeing, become ashamed, and in their shame, enter the narrow door that permits them to become transformed, to change, to squeeze out the pus of hatred -- and to see, with new eyes, that all human beings are brothers and sisters, one to the other.

God is indeed most profoundly found in the victim.

We see it this past week with the horrific bombing in Boston.

Innocent lives taken away or shattered because once again violence is the calling card of some individual or group.

A little girl with nails sticking out of her body from the shrapnel some human being packaged into a device intended to maim and kill.

Runners and their families with legs and arms blown off.

Violence is the coin of the realm it seems.

If you ask, "why does God allow this?" the answer is as close as the palm of your hand: with that palm you can strike or you can embrace; God doesn't control the decision, we do.

How little we have learned from Jesus' admonition to Peter: If you live by the sword, you'll die by the sword.

The Christian response to the violence in our world, violence against us and violence by us, has never changed since the days of our Lord: we are always and everywhere called upon to renounce violence.

We follow the one who follows perfectly the way of the Living God.

And the way of God is to refuse to return scorn with scorn, threat with threat, death with death.

Our faith is rooted in our trust that God has defeated death, so that we

need no longer fear death, so that we need no longer fight to avoid death.

Of course the objections immediately begin to fly.

“That’s just not how it is in the real world.”

“Pie in the sky thinking is okay for a Sunday morning, but not for our Monday through Saturday lives.”

And yet, this morning we read in Acts about a saintly woman who is dead.

Her death is a huge loss for the community.

It’s not professional mourners gathered around her, it’s her friends who miss her generosity and compassion.

Peter is summoned, and in the empty room, he speaks to her and she is revived, brought back from the dead.

What do we 21<sup>st</sup> century folks do with this story?

Is it a nice Bible story that can’t possibly be true – or if once true, no longer can be?

After all, we all know the dead stay dead, don’t we?

And indeed, the dead do stay dead, if we choose to live in the world of Humpty Dumpty who, after his great fall, can never be put back together again.

But what if we choose to live in the world made new by Jesus?

The world made new by Jesus is the world our baptism invites us into; not someday far into the future, but today, now, this moment; we are invited to enter into that world where the dead indeed are raised, where peace replaces war, where those who were once enemies now sit at a common table, and laugh.

Entering that world doesn’t come easily, nor does it come cheap.

It is a world in which the blows of violence, the scorn of anger, the slaps of hatred are accepted, taken in, endured; and not returned.

When our Lord tells us to do as he did in turning the other cheek, praying for our enemies, and forgiving endlessly, he is showing us the path that leads to this new Way of living, to the new life that we call the Kingdom of God.

We hear about the cost of entering that new world in Revelation this morning.

"Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows."

Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

We cannot think our way into that place because believing doesn't dictate doing; rather, it is doing that dictates believing.

One's viewpoint, as you have heard me say before, is determined by one's standpoint.

What you see is determined by where you stand.

It is our actions that form our beliefs far more often than our beliefs shape our actions.

Or in the words of Forrest Gump: "Stupid is as stupid does."

Just so, reading the bible or listening to our readings, even attending church on a regular basis, isn't quite enough.

We are called by Jesus not to study him, not to admire him, but to follow him.

The Jesuit missionary Anthony DeMello tells this story:

"The explorer returned to his people, who were eager to know about the Amazon.

But how could he ever put into words the feelings that flooded his heart when he saw exotic flowers and heard the night-sounds of the forests; when he sensed the danger of wild beasts or paddled his canoe over treacherous rapids?

He said, "Go and find out for yourselves."

To guide them he drew a map of the river.

But rather than go out, they pounced upon the map.

They framed it in their town hall.

They made copies of it for themselves.

And all who had a copy considered themselves experts on the river, for did they not know its every turn and bend, how broad it was and how deep, where the rapids were and where the falls?"

It is said that Buddha refused to be drawn into talking about God.

He was probably familiar with the dangers of drawing maps for armchair explorers."

So it is with our faith, and how our faith responds to violence.

If we begin with refusing to respond in kind; with prayer for the perpetrators, we may find that without even realizing it, we are moving, at long last, with, and not against, the grain of creation.

Refusing to participate in violence, no matter the cause, no matter the reason, is the necessary first step toward living in this new Way created by our Lord.

It is the paradox that in the victim, God is most profoundly present.

"When it comes to putting broken lives back together – when it comes, in religious terms, to the saving of souls – the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best.

To do for yourself the best that you have it in yourself to do—to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst—is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still.

The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from." F. Beuchner, *The Sacred Journey*, 46.

And so, salvation comes not from the lion who kills -- but from the lamb who is slaughtered.

In the victim, God is most profoundly present.

That paradox takes the lessons of our culture; of holding tight and being in control and winning the game, and turns those lessons on their head as we once again come face to face with the God who insists that if you will have, let go; if you will be made high, get low; and if you wish to really

live, prepare to die.

Such is the invitation of the good shepherd.

It is a strange invitation.

But if we accept, it leads to life, the only life worth living.

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