

Does Jesus Matter?

Why did Jesus die?

Most of us are taught at a young age this equation: People are sinners who owe a debt to God.

We owe the debt because our sin offends God and the offense must somehow be made right.

But the debt is too much for people to pay so God sends Jesus to pay it on our behalf.

Jesus dies on the cross, the debt is paid, heaven's gates are open, and all is well with us and God.

That's not in the Scriptures.

It's thinking that got it's legs in the eleventh century when lords owned estates and knights opened doors for ladies, days when a sense of honor and debt were front page news.

What that kind of thinking can leave us with is this: at best God is a little strange to demand the gruesome death of his Son for something the Son didn't even do - and at worst, God must be some kind of monster to require that deal - and yet, if it means our butts are safe after death - well, thank you very much!

All we need to do is muddle through this life the best we can, watching our backs, watching our bank accounts, fighting when necessary, and all will be well when we die.

This way of looking at why Jesus died puts humanity on the sidelines; God and Jesus do all the fixing, we just get the benefit.

And that's why, perhaps, many folks have no need for church, or at best will stop by occasionally to tip the hat at the bloodthirsty god who came up with this strange solution, and then get back to our everyday life in the every day world of dog eat dog.

But what if that's not the story of Jesus?

What if that's not the truth about God?

What if something very different is going on, something that takes us off the sidelines and puts us right into the game, something that requires our attention now, today, in this life — and what if that something has eternal consequences for everyone?

The story doesn't begin in the Middle Ages of Europe.

The story begins in Genesis, back in the garden, back to our first parents.

It begins with that fruit, that one thing in the garden forbidden to us.

Many folks think what was forbidden was fruit from the tree of knowledge, that God wanted us to be stupid.

Not so.

The forbidden fruit was fruit of the **knowledge of good and evil**: that's what was forbidden to us.

Why?

Because for whatever reason, we are not equipped to know the difference between good and evil.

I know that sounds strange.

Most people, certainly all religions, insist that our prime responsibility in life is to say what is right and who is wrong; to do our level best to try to live up to those standards and to reject those who don't.

And yet, ever since that fateful bite, the history of humanity has been one of conflict: between brothers and sisters, within communities, between nations.

Why?

Maybe it's because each side is convinced that they are the good, the right and the just — and the "other," and there is always an "other," is evil.

It works everywhere and it's at work today: between ISIS and the rest of the world, between democrats and republicans, capitalists and communists, Catholics and

Protestants, Jews and Palestinians, and those two neighbors fighting over the location of a fence.

This is humanity's original sin, our insistence that we actually know how to tell good from evil: it is this sin that killed Jesus.

The best political minds, the best religious minds of the day, all came together and were unanimous in their very best thinking: this Jesus must die!

And here we are this Easter morning, and I ask you to consider that perhaps Jesus died not because some debt was owed to God, but rather to teach us how to live a life that refuses to enter the debate about what is good and who is evil.

Heresy you say?

Consider these things.

Look at all the rules, meaning, our definitions of good and evil, that God violates when he enters the world through Jesus.

Born to an unwed teenage girl.

Born in a barn.

In his public ministry, Jesus associates not only with the Rotary Club and the Masons, but with hookers and loan sharks and the disfigured and disabled and Roman soldiers and bleeding women.

He dies, naked and in agony on a gibbet reserved for the most notorious criminals: his final words, "forgive them, they don't know what they're doing."

ALL a horror in his culture, ALL perhaps to show us that it isn't an angry God who needs to be paid back, but a loving God who wants everyone to be at home in this world, especially those who are seen as the "other."

Jesus is the definition of the "other."

To the Zealots he is a despised peacenik, to the Pharisees he is a law breaking scoundrel, to the priests, he is an ignorant tradesman, to the Romans, he is a dangerous subversive.

Jesus dies not because God is violent, but because we are, especially when it comes to the "other"; and the source of our violence is our insistence that we know the difference between good and evil.

Which is why Jesus says, over and over again, words we hate to hear:

"Don't judge."

"Let the weeds and wheat grow together."

"Remember, God is kind to the ungrateful, he gives rain to the undeserving."

"Have you not heard, it is mercy, not sacrifice, that I desire?"

In short, don't worry about good and evil.

Worry about serving each other, forgiving each other, enjoying each other, and when you do, you will see God's kingdom right before your eyes.

Which brings us to this morning.

Where is he?

Having turned our wisdom on its head, the victim of a grisly murder engineered by the best and the brightest, after his stone cold body is put away (all proof that he was a fool or a charlatan!)..... where is he?

He isn't here.....

The tomb is empty, he's gone ahead, to Galilee, where it all began.

But there are strange reports.....he's showing up in unusual places....then disappears...

We walked with this stranger for miles and his words made our hearts burn, we broke bread with him, and lo and behold, it's the Lord!, then poof! he's gone!

His life and death were such public affairs.

His resurrection, an oh so private affair, just between Jesus and God....

Did he float out on a cloud all perfect and white or was he the gaunt, wounded man, stumbling out of the black mouth of the tomb, bare feet on muddy ground, still hurting, yet, with a look of stunned triumph?

— he lives — yet certainly he died.....

That God's love reaches into and beyond our violence, our judgments, our worst crimes is an invitation to all of us to stop arguing about who is right and what is wrong; to open our eyes to the garden that we all live in, this beautiful Earth.

With its abundance and beauty and enough for everyone if only we will share.

That's why we need the church every day.

We need to be with each other so that we can practice this new way of living with each other, because if you're anything like me, I constantly judge, I constantly size up, and I need constant reminders to knock it off.

It isn't a demanding God sitting on a throne in heaven who insists on the death of an innocent in order to pay a debt.

It is a loving God who lives among us, suffering our worst violence to show us that even our worst violence cannot separate us from the love of God.

To know this is to know eternal life.

Not something that begins after death, but a life infused with the yeast, the seed, the light, that is the resurrection of our Lord.

This is our faith.

This is why Jesus matters.

Will you come along?

+amen