

Holy Thursday 2013

From our earliest days, violence, motivated by wanting what someone else has, seems to define what it is to be human.

From Cain's murder of Abel, a murder instigated by Cain's jealousy, to the centuries of wars fought over land and resources and geo-political advantage, violence, motivated by "what someone else has," seems to define what it is to be human.

We see it in the national solidarity that comes with every war.

You will recall the veteran reporter, Dan Rather, at the beginning of the Iraq war 10 years ago.

Throughout his entire career, Dan Rather was a constant critic of whatever administration was in power, a thorn in the side of every White House.

And yet, there was Dan Rather, 10 years ago, saying that when it comes to war, he's an American first, and a critical reporter a distant second.

Violence, it seems, serves as a kind of glue that holds communities together.

Examples of this are everywhere.

To be initiated into a gang, the potential gang member must first take part in an act of violence in order to win his place in the group.

We are seeing this just up the street at the Kamehameha IV Housing, with reports that gangs are making their new initiates start fights with bystanders in order to be granted gang membership.

Sororities and fraternities do the same thing; though usually with less deadly effect; but who can forget the Florida college band initiation of a young member who was forced to crawl down the aisle of a bus while being struck by fellow band members; a ritual that caused the young man to die.

Violence indeed serves as a kind of glue that holds communities together.

We see it so clearly this Holy Week, as our Lord is on his way to the cross: because, as the high priest Caiaphas tells his assembled elites:

"It's better for one man to die than for the nation to be destroyed."

Why all this talk about violence as the glue that holds our communities together?

Because only with the courage to face the true state of our affairs are we able to see the radically different community that Jesus creates in his life and teaching; and most profoundly in his grisly death and mind boggling resurrection.

Tonight, gathering his closest followers for the last time this side of the grave, he sets out to transform his community that is still obsessed with violence (remember on Sunday the excitement over the two swords?); he sets out to transform this community from one obsessed with violence into one based exclusively on service.

Taking a pan and a cloth, he does what only slaves are required to do: he washes their dirty, stinking feet.

When Peter objects, Jesus silences him: "unless you are willing to submit to this entirely new approach to life, then you cannot enter the new creation my death and resurrection are calling into being."

Tonight, Jesus sets in motion what will be the completion of his three years of ministry.

In just three days, the new creation will be born.

What's happening tonight is this: taking the role of the servant, he serves his followers.

"Do as I do; love as I love;" these are the commands of Jesus to them -- and to us.

Like Peter, we reject these commands at our own peril; because it is in the following of these commands, embracing lives of service and love, that we make our way through the narrow gate that leads to the life that God always intended for humanity.

So he takes bread.

The most common of ordinary food: and he helps us to see that this ordinary stuff of life IS Jesus.

He takes wine, the most common drink: showing us that this ordinary stuff of life IS Jesus.

It seems that the central message tonight is that if service becomes our fundamental attitude; if feeding on Jesus through that which is most ordinary in life becomes our habit; then the violence that comes from wanting what others have; the violence that holds communities together; can be and will be transformed into communities that find their glue not in envy and violence, but in compassion and self-giving.

Forming these communities -- whose glue is compassion and self-giving -- IS the great Christian calling.

And given the condition of our distressed and confused world, there is no greater call, no greater urgency, than the one our Lord beckons us to today.

Shall we then, begin?

+amen