

Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday (Year A, RCL)

CHRISTIANITY'S FIRST HATE CRIME (Isaiah 50:4-9, Philippians 2:5-11 (1-4), Matthew 26, 27)

By Wendy Farley

God created the world and loves humanity. Nothing, no person, no religion, no race, no ecosystem, no nation, no blade of grass was made without Word, Wisdom, Love. Humanity is all one in the eye of the divine, as a river is one though made of many countless drops of water. The “way” of Christianity is to embody this love in all we do, see, think, believe – not superficially, sentimentally. Agape is the very nature of soul, the “precious one-ing” that solders us to the divine. Agape sees the world with the eyes of the Beloved and recognizes that the “least of these” bears the face of Christ, the fairest face in heaven. Agape walks by the lilies of the field that will burn tomorrow and recognizes them as God’s delight. Agape delights in the world and aches for the cruelties, ignorance, and painfulness of our delusions. Because of agape we all have skin in the game in everything that happens: all the world’s suffering, all of its beauties. Agape teaches about how to be family. How to live like family. How to live with some strength and care in your hands. How to live with some joy in your mouth. How to put your hands gentle on where the wound is and draw out the grief. How to urge some kind of mercy into the shock-stained earth so that good will grow.”[i]

What has to happen to us that this natural aptitude to feel the pain of the world--to “gentle its wounds”— turns to hate? How do we miss the face of Christ, playing “in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, lovely in eyes not his?”[ii] What happens to our eyes that scared souls, wide-eyed children, crying mothers, desperate fathers, panicked young man, Jewish worshipers, gay lovers appear to us as rapacious foreigners, inhuman monsters, terrorizing infidels? How do hands made to “urge mercy into shock stained earth” take up guns and spray paint, legislation and executive orders against imaginary enemies?

It is the tragedy of Christianity that the first hate crime in this constellation of texts is Matthew’s way of telling the story of the passion. Jesus was a great teacher, an inspiring healer, a man whose radical compassion touched everyone –women without honor, under-employed fisher folk, Roman soldiers, Gentiles, Samaritans, scholarly Pharisees. The God-stalking hearts of Palestinian Jews flocked to him - and this terrified the Romans. They tried to abort his movement by making his death a spectacle of cruelty and unutterable degradation.

By the time this gospel was written the Jews had also been crushed by Roman violence. The memory of a time when they were a suffering servant in Babylon is being re-enacted. The people of Israel had been given the “tongue of a teacher” that it may “know how to sustain the weary

with a word.” And yet the chosen people found themselves in exile, everything lost, humiliated and beaten. Some 500 years later, Jerusalem was necklaced by the crucified bodies of Jewish men and emptied of women and children, carried off to slave markets in distant lands. The beautiful Temple, carefully reconstructed after the Babylonian exile, was reduced to rubble. Again Jews had been murdered, tortured, enslaved, exiled. But the miracle is that all of this outsized cruelty destroyed neither Jesus, nor his people, nor the movement begun in his name. Two of the world’s great religions were born out of this wreckage and they survive today, enduring witnesses to the difference between Roman and divine power.

Matthew remembers these events in a way typical of hate crimes. The victims of history become its monsters. Poor Pilate becomes an unwilling instrument of “the Jews” virulent and irrational hatred. The rabbi who healed them and walked with them and disclosed the goodness and nearness of Father-Mother God, tender in love and mercy now incites their lust for violence.

This is how hate crimes portray reality. History remembers Pilate as an appallingly cruel and arrogant prefect, even by Roman standards. History remembers the long anguish of the Jews. But Matthew has turned this world upside down and invites us to sympathize with the empire and despise its victims. Because hate crimes are embedded in our scriptures, it has been easy for Christians to valorize hatred and violence.

This is not the good news. But it is the context in which we receive good news.

We read today also the famous hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 (1-4) describing the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus. The preceding verses help us to understand why this is important. Paul is encouraging the Philippians to remain faithful in the face of conflict: “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete, being in full accord and one mind.” He begs this community to remember that it is compassion, sympathy, love and community that makes them lovers of Christ. They are being tempted to resort to the usual way – conflict, opposition, mutual hostility. He implores them to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ.” Begging the Philippians to put on the mind of Christ, he sings of a power that hollows out ego-clinging and is filled with love, compassion, sympathy. He does not call the Philippians to correct doctrine but to put on the mind of Christ and be Christ for a world that would draw them into hatred and opposition. The great kenotic hymn is a reminder that the ways of hatred and violence are not the ways of God. We are invited to share the mind of Christ and act with compassion and sympathy.

Let us put on the mind of Christ. “Morning by morning” let our “ears be wakened.” Let us renounce the virtues of empire, demand justice, and testify with the women to agape’s resurrection.

[i] Rosemarie Freeney Harding and Rachel Harding, *Remnants*, 235.

[ii] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *When Kingfishers Catch Fire*

Bible Study Questions:

1. Where in scripture do you find troubling teachings? Where do you find resources to support love and justice against hate and violence?
2. Paul's hymn seems to be about self-sacrifice, but the preceding verses emphasize love, sympathy, and compassion. What is the ethical vision to which we are being called in these scriptural passages? Can self-sacrifice also be about the power of compassion and love to fulfill us?
3. When you read deeply troubling news in the paper (or on tv, cell phone, etc) how does your faith provide a way to interpret what is happening and provide resources to respond well and with a good and courageous heart?

Wendy Farley, PhD is Director of the Program in Christian Spirituality and Rice Family Professor of Spirituality in the Graduate School of Theology of the University of Redlands.

ON Scripture - The Bible was made possible through generous grants from Lilly Endowment Inc. and The Henry Luce Foundation.



Lilly Endowment Inc.
A Private Philanthropic Foundation