

## Choosing Violence

In studying the Passion narratives from the four Gospels over the last few weeks, I have been reminded of some very basic facts. As the tale has unfolded, I've come face to face with aspects of the story that we all know but that my careful parsing of the Scriptures has brought into startling clarity. First, there has been the wisdom, kindness, and love of Jesus. The words and gestures he used to teach his friends about the nature of God and the Beloved Community have lasted 2000 years not simply from blind devotion but because they were insightful, brilliantly chosen, and resonate in the deepest places of our hearts and minds. His graciousness toward the friends who abandoned, denied, and even betrayed him is breathtaking but it's also the standard which we are called to follow.

Also, it's become abundantly clear to me all over again that Jesus of Nazareth was the victim of some of history's most appalling injustice. The "kangaroo court" of his trial before the Sanhedrin could not pass muster for fairness in any age. Unsubstantiated charges motivated by jealousy and political expediency are hardly unknown throughout history and to this very day but the treatment of Jesus by the leaders of his own nation seems particularly egregious.

And in today's reading, I have found myself grappling all week, actually for several weeks, with the overwhelming violence of the events of that Friday morning so long ago. At every turn, those who could act freely chose violence. Judas, the priests, the mob, Pilate, the soldiers, all of them chose violence in its myriad of forms. This should not surprise us. The tendency to violence is engrained in human history from the very beginning; it lurks within each one of us. The past week has been a particularly violent one for our nation. But, thanks be to God, there is an answer for all of this violence, well-known to us. The answer is love.

But before I can speak intelligibly of the answer to violence, I must speak of the violence itself. Only when we grapple with the savagery that humankind has visited upon each other can we summon the fortitude to push back against all the violence in our society, even those forms which we have enshrined. And so to begin, I must shine a light on the violence that is chosen at every step of the reading which you've just heard.

Matthew's account of the fate of Judas is unique in the Gospels. Only Luke, in The Acts of the Apostles, has any note of what happened to Judas at all and his story is completely different — there is no repentance and no suicide, just a messy death. But Matthew's account rings more true, somehow. It reminds us that Judas *was* one of the Twelve, one of Jesus' closest friends for the three years or so of his ministry. Again, we can't know Judas' motivation for his act of betrayal but we can certainly understand his remorse over his action and the deep despair it must have created in him. The tragedy of Judas is that he confesses his sin to the wrong people. Had he gone to the other disciples, they may have forgiven him just as they evidently forgave Peter. Had he restrained his grief until Sunday, the Risen Jesus surely would have forgiven him. But the priests, his co-conspirators, had no interest in forgiving him. To them, he was just a tool of their "necessary" action. They dehumanized him, just as they did to Jesus, who they saw only as a threat to their orderly existence. Their disdain and disinterest was a form of violence toward Judas and he met violence with violence — not toward the priests but toward himself. Unable to find any value in his own life, crushed by his failure of fidelity toward the one he had followed for years, he chose to end his life by violence.

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A more obvious choice of violence is that of the crowd gathered outside the Praetorium to hear the denouement of the trial. Matthew tells us that Pilate gave the crowd a choice between the release of Jesus “called the Christ” or of Jesus Barabbas, “a notorious prisoner.” Mark tells us that “Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection,” which Luke echoes. John simply calls Barabbas “a bandit.” In any case, the meaning is clear: given the choice between a man who taught that freedom came from love and peace and a man who acted for freedom from the Romans by violence, the mob, possibly egged on by the priests, voted for the freedom fighter. It sounds so modern, I scarcely need comment, though I will have a further point to make about this part of the story in a few minutes.

As with Judas, there have been any number of interpretations over the centuries of Pilate’s actions. Was his conscience troubled by this quiet Galilean, “a most amazing man” in the words assigned to Pilate by Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice? Did his wife’s bad dreams seem an omen to him? Or was he simply bored, playing cat and mouse with the Jewish leaders who were so often a thorn in his side. Historically, it seems unlikely he would have given Jesus much thought at all. Yes, it was against the policy of Caesar Tiberius to execute an innocent prisoner but Tiberius was also unforgiving to those who allowed revolution to be fomented. Records show that Pilate was eventually recalled to Rome for his overly harsh style of governance, so the picture of the reluctant executioner seems unlikely. But the result was the same. Whether Pilate sent Jesus to his death against his own best instincts or without a thought, he sent him to die nonetheless. He had him flogged first, which was common practice; a punishment designed to weaken the body through blood loss and speed the effects of crucifixion. Like the priests with Judas, he waved Jesus away. He washed his hands. He chose violence.

Finally, the Roman soldiers who took custody of Jesus clearly chose violence. They could have escorted him to a cell and made him comfortable until the time of his execution. They could have simply sat him in a corner out of the way with a guard to ensure he didn’t escape and left him alone. But they chose to have “a little fun.” “Boys will be boys,” don’t you know. Since he apparently claimed to be a king, they dressed him up like one. They mocked him and, as we’ve recently learned, “indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter.” They tortured him, not because they were trying to extract information or get a confession. Just because they could. Trained to commit violence, like soldiers since time immemorial and up to today, they chose violence when there was no need.

But none of this should be surprising to us. The track record of humankind when it comes to violence is dismal in the extreme and our Scriptures reflect this fact. Legendarily, after the rebellion from God, the very next sin is that of murder, the killing of brother by brother. Disappointed that his brother was favored, Cain chose violence. Again and again we read of violence in the Bible and of its consequences. Cain is exiled for his fratricide. Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed after threatening Lot and his guests. Saul strikes out in jealousy against David and loses his kingdom. David rapes Bathsheba and has her husband killed. One of his sons grows up to rape his half-sister and another rebels against his father. The choice of violence only results in more violence.

Nor is this woeful tale restricted to events prior to the coming of Christ. For centuries, elements in the Church have used this morning’s passage as justification for the most violent forms of

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anti-Semitism. “His blood be on us and on our children,” is an unlikely sentiment to be expressed by a mob consumed with blood lust. Consequences, especially generational ones, are reflections not available to the so-called “lizard mind” of raw emotion. Nevertheless, when it comes to relations between Church and Synagogue, the Church has been represented by those who choose violence as recently as yesterday in Pittsburgh. Likewise, the history of the American experiment is steeped in blood. The first tribe to encounter Columbus, the Arawaks, were rapidly decimated, not only by European diseases, but by the explorer’s brutal policies of tribute (if the quota of gold was not delivered, the natives had their hands cut off and bled to death), slavery, and retribution against the understandable resistance. I think at this point I do not need to point out the violence of the system of African slavery that built the wealth of this nation, along with the confiscation of land from the indigenous peoples. But again and again, good American Christian folk have turned to violence with riots against immigrants and freed Blacks, with “union busters,” and with *sub rosa* police actions against “undesirables.” And, of course, there are the results of our foreign policy which have carried American violence “from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli” and far beyond, often against nations that are poorer and less well-equipped than our own. Still today, people choose violence.

Every day, Americans choose violence with guns. I think you’ve probably heard from me on this topic amply at this point. But I do want to call your attention to the “shootings of the week.” On Wednesday, a black man and a black woman were executed by a white man at a grocery store in Jeffersontown, Kentucky. Now that may seem mighty far away to some of you but you need to know that Kroger was the grocery store of choice for the Boyers back in 1989-1990. Kit, Connie and I lived in an apartment within walking distance of that store during my last year of seminary and until I accepted my first managing director’s post in Massachusetts. For us, that shooting hit home. I was frantic on Wednesday until I heard from my sister and her girls and their loved ones. And then, yesterday, another hate-filled White Christian man shot up a synagogue in Pittsburgh during worship. The *New York Times* quoted Gov. Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania as saying in a statement that “these senseless acts of violence are not who we are as Americans.” But I’ve got to tell you, friends, without the presence of God in our hearts, this is *exactly* who we are as Americans. Just two weeks ago, my doctor greeted me at my regular check up by saying to me, “I’m so glad you’re here. What words of wisdom do you have for this awful time?” We went on to talk about her husband’s family, most of whom died in the Nazi death camps, and how they feared the recrudescence of anti-Semitism in the United States. I’m afraid I wasn’t very wise – I spoke of hope and my conviction that America would right itself but I’m really not all that sure I believe that any more. Over and over again, we choose violence.

Even when we do not choose violence ourselves, we often choose to ratify violent actions by our police and military. Here at Good Shepherd last month, we had a discussion in Adult Sunday School, under Lynn Melby’s leadership, of ethically problematic situations. One situation presented was the classic “madman who has planted a bomb” scenario. The question was, if you have him in custody and he won’t tell where the bomb is, do you torture him? Some very fine people, if I can still use that phrase without irony, suggested that such a strategy might be acceptable under certain circumstances. My response was and is that torture is *never* appropriate. A study recently reported in “Psychology Today” magazine involving professional interrogators from the police of several countries showed that “‘rapport-based’ interrogation techniques are viewed as generally the most effective, not torture.” The article defines “rapport-

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based” techniques as “finding common ground with the detainee, demonstrating kindness and respect, and meeting their basic needs for example, food and water.” “Psychology Today” also reported that “In a study entitled, ‘Interviewing High Value Detainees: Securing Cooperation and Disclosures’, also published in the academic journal ‘Applied Cognitive Psychology’, detainees were 14 times more likely to disclose information early in an interview when practitioners utilized rapport-building compared with when rapport was not used. 64 persons from five countries comprising 34 law enforcement practitioners experienced in conducting interviews with high value detainees, and 30 people who had been questioned following their detention for alleged terror related activities, were interviewed.” There have also been recent articles in “Scientific American,” entitled, “We’ve Known for 400 Years that Torture Doesn’t Work,” and in “Forbes,” entitled “Torture Has Never Been An Effective Means Of Information Gathering-- Just Ask The Romans,” along these same lines. “Scientific American” and “Forbes” aren’t exactly the liberal snowflake press, friends. Even when it flies in the face of evidence, we *choose* violence.

As a final example, I’m going to stick my neck way out and suggest that what we teach our children by their participation in youth leagues and our reverence for the collegiate and professional level of football is not sportsmanship but violence. Although I was once a fairly avid football fan, I’ve been more and more bothered for years by the glorification of the “big hit” and the misbehavior overlooked in football players at all levels. The final nail in the coffin of my football fandom, however, came with the recent studies showing the dangers of concussions, particularly for children who play football. A recent issue of “Sojourners” magazine featured an interview with Dr. Bennett Omalu, a forensic pathologist and neuropathologist who earned degrees in his native Nigeria and in various schools across the U.S. In the course of performing an autopsy on former Pittsburgh Steeler Mike Webster, Omalu found that the former Pro-Bowler, who’d suffered from depression, erratic behavior, and other neurological issues, had Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy caused by the repeated blows to the head he took as an offensive lineman. A movie, starring Will Smith as Omalu, has been made, dramatizing the case and including the threats Omalu has received against his life and his family. The NFL, of course, denies everything, although they have yet to find a physician of Omalu’s training to refute his and other studies. Those other studies are pretty damning. “A 2017 study from Boston University’s Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy Center found that playing tackle football before age 12 can double the risk of developing behavioral problems later in life. The study also found that it triples the chance of depression... a recent Boston University study found 110 of 111 brains of former NFL players had CTE. The study acknowledged a clear selection bias: Many of the brains were from people who exhibited symptoms of serious brain trauma before they died... The Sanford Sports Science Institute estimates that middle school tackle football players receive an average of 250 hits to the head per season. According to researchers from the University of Michigan, that number jumps to 650 for high school players. In a 2016 editorial for the American Journal of Bioethics, Dr. Steven Miles and Dr. Shailendra Prasad urge health professionals to call for an end to tackle football programs in public schools.” I don’t think it’s coincidence, by the way, that as Dr. Omalu points out, “Black men make up about 5 to 6 percent of the U.S., right? But they’re 75 percent of the NFL. Why is that?” Perhaps the answer is that to escape the poverty most of them find themselves in, we force them to choose violence.

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But regardless of how we may glorify it in our culture, regardless of how much a part of our national, cultural, and human heritage it is, regardless of the fact that violence has been with us since the very beginning of humankind, it is still a choice. We are not compelled to choose violence. We can choose peace, we can choose kindness, we can choose love. It may not be easy. For many of us, it will not be easy. I know that I get up every morning needing to remind myself to choose peace and kindness and love. But I know that I can because the Spirit of Christ empowers me. I know that the more I seek to follow Jesus, the more I will follow Jesus. And I know that even when I stumble, even when I fall, even when I am unrighteous and unloving and at my worst, the love of God waits to forgive and embrace me. And you. And all of us flawed, angry, messed-up, beautiful human beings, made in the image of God. My sisters and my brothers, we have failed and we will fail. All of us carry the seeds of violence. But God loves us anyway and God will never, never give up on us. Thanks be to God! Amen.