

Hatred Without Cause

Ordinarily, on Trinity Sunday, I'd give in to my not-so-secret desire to be a theologian and do my best to think of something brilliant to say to convince you all of the importance, veracity, and continuing need for this often frustrating and obscure bit of Christian theology. But today is not that day. Although this passage contains a lovely and early bit of Trinitarian doctrine and although I will end up spending some time with that, my focus for this morning is on the overall theme of this passage from John's reconstruction of Jesus' final discourse with his disciples. How is it that this man-who-was-God who came preaching peace and love managed to inspire so much hate, not only for himself but also for those who did their best to follow him over the ensuing decades and centuries? How does this legacy of division still play itself out for us, nearly two thousand years later? And how is it that we can best cope when we find ourselves squarely in the crosshairs of what one of my favorite theologians called "the domination system?" As I take my leave from you all, quite literally for the next three months, I feel the need to assess where we, as the Body of Christ, stand vis-à-vis "the world" and to offer some words of comfort and of hope to sustain us all while we are parted, one from the other.

But let's start, as I usually do, with some points of context and word meaning. It's important to note, in the very first verse of our passage, just what is meant by "world," when John remembers Jesus as saying, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you." When I went to Seminary, back before the deluge, we used to use an enormous book, nearly two thousand pages in its current edition, called Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible with Greek and Hebrew Lexicon. According to Strong's, the Greek word $\kappa\omicron\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma$, used by John for "world," has no fewer than eight meanings in the Bible, many of them used in the Gospel According to John. There are a couple of primary meanings in John's Gospel. One, as Strong's puts it, is "the inhabitants of the earth, the human family," as it is in the famous John 3:16: "For God so love the world..." But the other, used here, is quite different. Strong's assigns this usage and several others in John to this definition: "the ungodly multitude; the whole mass of (persons) alienated from God, and therefore hostile to the cause of Christ." So when we read the word $\kappa\omicron\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma$ or "world" in this passage, it is not the whole world, beloved and called good by God, that we are to think of but rather that subset of humankind in particular who have for various reasons set their hearts against God's will.

It's also important to remember that when Jesus warns his disciples against the hatred of the world for them, he's speaking not so much about the "whole mass of persons alienated from God" but more specifically about those who have power in that group. Walter Wink, that favorite theologian I mentioned a moment ago, referred to the like group in our time as "the Powers that Be" or as representatives of the "Domination System," that is, according to Wink, "unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all." I think we all remember the representatives of the Domination System who turned to violence to rid themselves of the annoyance of Jesus. They were the ones whom he criticized while he offered comfort and hope to those under their control. They were the Romans, against whom he suggested the use of the weapon of nonviolent disobedience when he said, "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." They were the Herodians, the sycophants surrounding the Tetrarch whom Jesus called, in our parlance, "Herod, that weasel." They were the scribes and the Pharisees, the religious leaders, some of whom were sympathetic to Jesus, but for whom he reserved his harshest criticisms: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross

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sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.” All of these found common cause to torture and execute Jesus, dismissing his criticisms by criminalizing him. And it was the heirs of the scribes and the Pharisees that, in the view of the Johannine community, severed the already troubled relationship between the early followers of Jesus and the mainstream of Judaism by excluding the Nazarenes from the synagogues.

There are, of course, two sides to every story. As the great Baptist preacher Will Campbell said, “anyone who is not as concerned with the immortal soul of the dispossessor as he is with the suffering of the dispossessed is being something less than Christian.” That is hard to remember when one is suffering as the psalmist who wrote the original of our Call to Worship this morning suffered. Or when one has been excluded from the company of one’s family and friends. I would say, or when is being crucified for bringing truth to the world but of course we remember that Jesus said, “Father, forgive them.” Still, it is hard to consider one’s enemies as God’s beloved children too but if we do not then we become the monster that we have been struggling against. This is just one of the truths that the Advocate testifies to within our hearts and we ignore the Holy Spirit at our peril.

As is so often the case, I say these things to you because I need to hear them myself. I am as prone to *schadenfreude* as the next person. Do you know that lovely German word? It means “pleasure derived by someone from another person's misfortune.” It’s germane to this topic because we still have the experience of having people who hate us because we do what we think is right and they think is wrong. As a personal example, my step-mother, with whom I’ve always had a difficult relationship, is quite conservative in her Christianity, a stance she came to in her 40s, after she’d married my father. When I accepted the pastorate of this church, she apparently got online and researched the Evergreen Association and found that the association was created out of the controversy around the place of LGBTQ persons in the life of ABC of the Northwest. She then took it upon herself to send me an e-mail, not for the purposes of opening a dialogue on the subject but to tell me how strongly she disagreed with what she perceived to be my stance, calling me, among other things, “a tool of Satan.” As far as I was concerned, that was the end of my trying (and failing) to have any kind of working relationship with her. It’s hard for me to wish her well or pray for her well-being, although on my better days, I manage it. I guess I felt like there was still hope for me when I heard some months ago that she’d been rather badly injured in a fall and my immediate response was not, “serves her right,” but “oh, how awful for her.” For once, I avoided *schadenfreude*.

Schadenfreude has come to play in recent days as I read news of Judge Paul Pressler and Rev. Paige Patterson. Now, those names probably don’t mean much to some of you but for some of us they bring up some very unpleasant memories. You see, these two men were the proud architects of the Fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. Some of us remember when the SBC, now the very bastion of fundamentalist Christianity in the U.S., was actually a “big tent” organization with the same emphasis on personal and congregational liberties that we (mostly) still enjoy in ABC life. Academic freedom at the seminaries was part of that SBC, too. But when the Patterson/Pressler party was finished with their machinations, churches were disfellowshipped, individuals were discouraged, and the seminaries had been “cleansed” of those who wouldn’t toe the line. My seminary years were significant for me in

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terms of my learning and spiritual growth and I made friends among the faculty like the Scalises and the Courtneys and Bill Leonard and Frank Tupper and the late Glenn Stassen and among fellow students like John Styron and David & Colleen Burroughs who are important to me to this day. But I cannot think of those years without remembering the pervading sense of threat and doom that pervaded the seminary in those years.

At the time, of course, Patterson and Pressler and company claimed to be doing God's work, cleansing the convention from the heretical and the confused and the outright evil. Those of us on the receiving end of their judgment were always pretty sure it was about power and money. Certainly, the righteousness of the two fundamentalist leaders has been called into question in recent days as Pressler has been revealed as a having a penchant for forcing himself on younger men who were in his power either because he was their youth minister or because he was their senior at a law firm. And Patterson has been forced to resign as President of Southwestern Baptist Seminary due to his treatment of women and his attitude towards domestic violence. Did I experience some schadenfreude as I read this news in the last few months? Yes, I'm guilty. Am I trying to adjust my attitude? Yes, I am and I need your prayers for that.

I also confess to a certain amount of satisfaction over the news that yet another church is contemplating leaving what used to be called ABC of the Northwest to join Evergreen. Most of you will remember that ABC of the Northwest, which now calls itself "Mission Northwest," did their best to exclude University Baptist and Seattle First Baptist Churches from fellowship. By doing so, they inadvertently created the Evergreen Association and now as many as 47 churches that were or might have been part of their region have abandoned them. I'm delighted for Evergreen, of course, but there is some schadenfreude in there as well, especially in light of the recent move by Mission Northwest leadership to force a sell off the Baptist camps in Washington and dissolve Washington Baptist Convention with the lion's share of the proceeds going, of course, to Mission Northwest. Was the exclusion of the churches at the heart of Evergreen a theological matter? Maybe but money and power considerations are never far away.

We live in a nation now where exclusion for reasons of ideological, racial, and gender purity is the number one strategy of those in power. The "Make America Great Again" gang has attracted to their hideous crusade some of the very same folks I've just been talking about, all of those who think they are doing God's will by pushing out those who look differently, think differently, act differently from them. Anyone who isn't white enough, straight enough, affluent enough, will be marginalized. If you think we are different in Washington State or perhaps just on this side of the mountains, think again. I received word on Friday and shared with many of you on Friday and Saturday the news that the "Powers That Be" in Olympia are trying to deny the constitutional rights of the Poor People's Campaign to peacefully assemble and have our say in the state capitol by ignoring our permit requests and refusing basic services such as electricity and porta-potties at our next rally. Remember how Walter Wink defined the Domination System? "...unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all." I'll be in Olympia tomorrow with Revs. Wim Mauldin and Doug Avilesbernal and some other faithful folk. Come celebrate the truth of Memorial Day with us.

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In the midst of warning his followers that this is exactly the kind of thing we should expect when we follow his teaching and spread his message, Jesus provided us with the ultimate word of hope: “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.” The truth comes from the Father and from the Son, planted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. And the truth, as John has earlier recorded Jesus saying, will set us free. These are dark days, my sisters and my brothers, just as the disciples faced following the death of Jesus, just as the early Church faced when their friends and families in the synagogues turned against them, just as people of goodwill and faith have faced under Rome and the barbarian invasions and those who mistook power in the Church for righteousness. Millions have suffered under the Domination System, whatever face it has taken but if we love and do not hate, if we seek the truth rather settling for the lie, then we can be assured that love and truth will win in the end.

It’s been a while since I quoted my favorite contemporary band, U2, in a sermon. Must be because Melby is here that I was inspired to do so today; I always get such a great reaction out of him. In the last couple of years, they’ve released two companion albums: “Songs of Innocence” and “Songs of Experience.” I guess I expected the first to be all sweetness and light and the second to be dark but the reverse is actually true. In “Songs of Innocence,” we get all the angst and disillusionment and anger of the young Bono; in “Songs of Experience,” we get his reflections as a mature adult (well, as mature as a rock star can be) and the final impression is one of hope. In one of the latter album’s true rockers, “The Blackout,” we get this rumination on the state of the world: “Statues fall / democracy is flat on its back, Jack / We had it all / and what we had is not coming back, Zac / A big mouth / says the people don’t want to be free for free / The blackout / is this an extinction event we see?” But the chorus digs deep into the Christian faith that the bandmates have espoused, some of them since before they were famous: “When the lights go out / and you throw yourself about in the darkness / where you learned to see / When the lights go out / don’t you ever doubt / the light that we can really be...” Bono echoes the words of Jesus, “You are the light of the world.” If there is any doubt about where the boys from Dublin see the ultimate hope and light, the following song answers that doubt: “When you think you’re done / You’ve just begun / Love is bigger than anything in its way.”

Don’t dig U2? That’s OK. Let me borrow an ending to this sermon from one Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. on March 31, 1968, just days before his assassination. It was in this speech as well as some others leading up to it that he announced the formation of the original Poor People’s Campaign but that’s not the part I want to quote. What I’m interested in is his use of some other song lyrics to remind us that love and truth will ultimately prevail. He said

“For more than two centuries our forebearers labored here without wages. They made cotton king, and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of the most humiliating and oppressive conditions. And yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to grow and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn’t stop us, the opposition that we now face will surely fail.

We’re going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands. And so, however dark it is, however deep the angry feelings are, and however violent explosions are, I can still sing “We Shall Overcome.”

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We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

We shall overcome because Carlyle is right—"No lie can live forever."

We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right—"Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again."

We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right—as we were singing earlier today,
Truth forever on the scaffold,

Wrong forever on the throne.

Yet that scaffold sways the future.

And behind the dim unknown stands God,

Within the shadow keeping watch above his own.

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

Thank God for John, who centuries ago out on a lonely, obscure island called Patmos caught vision of a new Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God, who heard a voice saying,

"Behold, I make all things new; former things are passed away."

God grant that we will be participants in this newness and this magnificent development. If we will but do it, we will bring about a new day of justice and brotherhood and peace. And that day the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy. God bless you."

Amen