

Our Way of Coming Together

Rev. David Reynolds

Luke 19: 29-40

Luke 23: 1-49

What a story! And what a day this is, what a way for the church to lead into Holy Week, by putting it all on one day, from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the Passion and crucifixion. And as we hear these two stories together, it's obvious from the ways we have always observed this day that in the first story, we identify with the crowds waving the palm branches and praising Jesus, shouting "Hosanna!" And as we move on into the Passion story, we most likely identify with those friends and family of Jesus who stood at a distance watching all this unfold, feeling terribly helpless.

Those identifications come from our love of Jesus and from our wondering how this could have happened to such a one. And they come from the ways we've been inclined to answer that question. You know, we've often focused on Jesus and on his own peoples' mistaken views about him. We've noted that the Zealots and for that matter most of the Pharisees were looking and hoping for a typical, military, revolutionary messiah to come and lead them in violent revolt over the Romans. You know, noting that obviously they turned on him when they realized he wasn't about that. Or sometimes we've focused on the Jewish high priests and their feeling threatened and then their ability to turn the crowd. Or, some more modern interpretations in both scholarship and in movies take the point of view that it was really Pilate and the Romans who were to blame. Crucifixion was, after all, a peculiarly Roman form of execution, reserved specifically to make a spectacle out of those who plotted against Roman rule.

I'd like to suggest to you this morning that there are a number of places in this story in which we can and should see ourselves. As I read through this story I was struck by what Luke says about Herod. You remember, he says that when Pilate sent Jesus over to him, he was "very glad, for he had wanted to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign." It was all about being entertained with Herod. And I thought, "how modern." I mean, we have a whole cable television network devoted to the entertainment industry, devoted to keeping us informed about all those celebrities (from the entertainment world) we voyeuristically watch and want to be entertained by.

And we have these immensely popular shows like *American Idol* and *Dancing with the Stars*, in which we are essentially saying: "entertain me and then I'll vote on how well you entertained me! Aside from whatever else that may say about us and Herod, the way this little episode is used in this story reveals a much deeper dynamic about what's really going on. That is, they all had very different agendas, Herod, Pilate, the Sanhedrin, the soldiers, the women who followed along, weeping for him and beating their breasts, the crowd. It's a tremendously diverse group with their own agendas, most of which really have very little to do with Jesus, and yet they all came together around this act of crucifixion. Everyone involved in the story either explicitly or implicitly by their abandonment or by standing by in helpless silence gives their assent to this crucifixion.

And that's the point. We are all responsible for this, then and now, over and over through history. You know, for years we've read these somewhat varying accounts in the four Gospels and keep coming away confused, trying to figure out who was really to blame. But, friends it's not that the Gospel writers didn't really know what happened! It's that they really did know what happened at a much deeper level. New Testament scholar, Gil Baile has written, "If, as Paul insisted, the Cross is at the center of the Christian message, [then its] relevance would seem to depend on whether or not collective violence of the kind that is...indistinguishable from that involved in the crucifixion is the linchpin of human delusion."

Says Baile: "The surest way to miss the link between the cure (the crucifixion and its aftereffects) and the disease (the structures of scapegoating violence upon which all human social arrangements have depended) is to read the passion story with an eye to locating and denouncing those most responsible for it. There is deep irony in this. The fact that we automatically search the text – or the world outside the text – for culprits on whom to blame the crucifixion is proof that we are one of the culprits, for the

crucifixion was demanded by those determined to find a culprit to blame or punish or expel. That is the single consistent thing about how this story is told across all the gospels: this incredibly diverse group of people and agendas all came together around this. They all needed someone to blame for the dissatisfaction and crises they felt in their world and their lives. It's here in Luke's telling, isn't it ?

Pilate the Roman ruler, sends Jesus to Herod, the Jewish King, and Herod sends him back, to which Luke observes, "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies." You see? The story is all about the coming together of a crowd. We can be behaving like enemies when all of a sudden a common enemy comes along and suddenly we are friends. There's an Arab saying that goes: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Look at our own country. Republicans and Democrats can be miles apart on everything, but vote as one against Saddam Hussein. We can go through the most hotly contested election in our nation's history, but an act of terrorism suddenly unites us behind our president against a common enemy.

The Passion story of Jesus in any of the Gospels is not about any particular groups of people or particular persons who were there that day. It is about us human beings and the habit we have of uniting ourselves in violence against common enemies. And the centrality of the cross to Christian faith is lost if responsibility for its violence is shifted from us all to some. As Luke tells this story, when they crucify him, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

And that's at the center, you see? They all come together to kill the one who loves and forgives them *all*. And they can't see, they don't know that that's what's brought them together! That he forgives them *all*. He doesn't just forgive me, he forgives my enemy too. Jesus, don't take away our self-righteousness in scapegoating others, or we will scapegoat you. That's what this story is about. When Jesus asks for forgiveness of these people, he's not just asking that Pilate and Herod and the Sanhedrin and the soldiers be forgiven. Forgiving them would be tremendously difficult for us, but on a good day we might manage it. But no, they aren't the only ones who need forgiveness. The disciples who were in hiding needed it, too. And the women who wept for him needed it. And those standing helplessly watching at a distance needed it, too.

Why? Because you see what they were saying by thinking they were helpless to do anything? They were saying the only real power in the world is scapegoating violence, and in that battle we're going to lose, so we're helpless. Jesus is saying: forgive them for assuming that without crucifixions and crowd control, they couldn't build a better world. And, forgive us for assuming that without soldiers and bombers, without wealth and prominence, we can't make a difference anyhow. It's all the same thing. This story is about all of us needing forgiveness for our way of gaining a relative peace against common enemies.

Since the beginning of our human cultures, *our* way of communion, *our* way of keeping the peace is to unify against scapegoats. That's what ritual blood sacrifice was about for thousands of years. That's what war is still about. It's the sin from which we need to be saved. And the crucifixion of Jesus gives us the eyes to see that for what it is, that we might be saved. In this story God says emphatically, "your ways are *not* my ways!" And on the night before he died, Jesus took bread and broke it. He enacted a new way for us to come together and to be reconciled and to find peace. It is for the first time a way of coming together as human beings which doesn't have to be over against anyone else.

See, in Holy Communion, in this way of coming together, what matters is what we can give up, ourselves, our preferences, our attachments, our loves, our own history in this church...all the things that before we were willing to fight for. In *this* way of coming together, what matters is what we can give up in order to come into the other person's world, in order to be in fuller, loving relationship with them, no matter whether they're like us or not! And Jesus set us our example and enacted it before his death, in this meal. He said, in order that I might be reconciled even with my enemies, I'm willing to give up even my life: My body, my blood given for you, and for all for the forgiveness of sins.

Friends this, God's life in the world, is to be *our* life now. We are the body of Christ. That's not just something Jesus did. We are to replicate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So come. Come as witnesses to this *new* way of peace in this world, this Holy Communion, this holy way of coming together, enemies and friends, alike and different, as God's children.

Amen.