

Lenten Luncheon Series 2019
St. John's Episcopal Church
April 11, 2019
Luke 4:14-30

Let me begin by expressing my thanks to St. John's, Trinity, First Baptist, Saint Paul's, and Bethel for hosting these Lenten services and lunches. This year's series is the re-boot of a long-standing tradition, and I hope it has been for you an opportunity to meet your neighbors, grow in faith, and observe a holy Lent.

As the treasurer for the "Operation I. D." I am particularly grateful for the special offering that has been received at each of these events. Your generosity enables the very people Jesus called "the least of these" to acquire that document essential to life in these United States since 9/11 – a state-issued I.D. Through this ministry over the years, hundreds of our neighbors who have found themselves homeless have been able to acquire that vital document.

I can't think of a better way for us Christians to observe the season of Lent, and that's a good thing, because the very notion of "Lent" still sits uneasily on the shoulders of this life-long Presbyterian.

You won't be surprised to know that John Calvin took a dim view of Lent and all other liturgical seasons. Perhaps that's why, as a child growing up in a Presbyterian manse, my notion of "lent" was, shall we say, quite limited. For me, "lent" was the stuff that collects in your belly button. (Provided, of course, that you are an "innie" and not an "outie".)

So, to this day, I approach the season of Lent with a hermeneutic of suspicion. I have greatly benefitted from the sermons of my colleagues in this series, however. In one way or another, each has focused on the cross of Jesus Christ – its expression of God's love for the world, its dramatic sign of God's self-emptying, and its power to break down the dividing walls of hostility.

I too would like to talk about the cross today, but from a somewhat different angle.

I worry, quite frankly, about the kind of piety that focuses so much on the doctrine of atonement that it misses an essential element of the rest of the Good News of Jesus Christ. In particular, I am growing increasingly uncomfortable with how the

emphasis on Christ's "sacrificial atonement" has crowded out other ways of understanding the meaning of the cross.

Of course, I accept Jesus' death on the cross as an expression of God's sacrificial love for the world, and I believe that his suffering was redemptive for all of humankind, making us one with God.

However, I am troubled by how the idea of sacrificial atonement has been weaponized through the centuries and used to perpetuate the suffering of others – especially the suffering of women, people of color, and those on the bottom rung of the social ladder.

There is an unfortunate link between the idea of redemptive suffering and the exploitation of the weak and the vulnerable.

Through the years, I have counseled several women who tried to escape from abusive marriages. Many said that when they went to their pastor to talk about the abuse they were suffering, they were told to go home and do their best not to trigger their husband's wrath. And if they could not accomplish that, they should endure as Jesus did. Their sacrifice, they were told, mirrored the sacrifice of Christ.

In the same way, slaves were taught to endure their chains, children were taught to obey their parents, however violent their discipline, and the poor were taught to seek contentment in their poverty. Just as Christ emptied himself and suffered on the cross, so should these sufferers empty themselves, imitating him.

I am convinced that the misapplication of the doctrine of sacrificial atonement has contributed in a large part to the church's historical acquiescence to slavery, sexism, misogyny, and child abuse. The church should have sparked a "me too" movement long ago, but our misapplied doctrine got in the way.

This misapplication has also distorted a fundamental doctrine of the faith – that is, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. When we speak as though God the Father were the *agent* of the Son's suffering, we pit one person of the Trinity over against the other and we destroy the essential unity of the Godhead. This, to me, is a very dangerous way of thinking, and reduces the passion of Christ to a form of cosmic child abuse.

Whatever one's take on Christ's passion, the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that wherever the Son is, there also is the Father and the Spirit. Wherever the Father is, there also is the Spirit and the Son. Wherever the Spirit is, there also is the Son and the Father. We must not allow the doctrine of atonement to drive a wedge between the persons of the Trinity.

I will not attempt in a short sermon to work out all the kinks in the doctrine of atonement. In the final analysis, it is, of course, a mystery that defies simple explanation.

Let me suggest, however that a useful corrective to a weaponized atonement theory is the recognition that crucifixion was first and foremost the action of the state. Jesus, as the Creed says, suffered "under Pontius Pilate," the Roman Governor. Crucifixion was Rome's way of putting down any and all resistance to empire. It was Caesar's weapon for keeping people under his thumb.

The cross was what happened to anyone who dared, as Jesus did, to stand in the great tradition of the Old Testament prophets.

Beloved, Jesus was not killed by God. He was killed by Rome. Why? Because he brought good news to the poor. Because he proclaimed release to the captives and recovery of sight to blind. Because he declared God's intention to let the oppressed go free in the season of the Lord's favor, which began in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was *more* than a prophet, but he was *no less* than a prophet. And that's what got him killed. However much his sacrifice was for the sin of the world, it was also for the liberation of humankind from the powers and principalities whose corrupt systems perpetuate poverty, disease, racial animosity, and economic injustice.

It's true that Jesus died for you and me. He also died to make us free:

- free to speak the truth to power,
- free to critique and improve our own culture,
- free to reach beyond the dividing walls of hostility being erected right now by malignant narcissists in high places,
- free to call "BS" on the politicians who perpetuate and defend gun violence,
- free to model for those around us a community of radical welcome and hospitality,
- free to love God and neighbor.

Sisters and brothers, something has gone radically wrong when Christians in this nation can worship the Crucified One on Good Friday and continue to support policies that rip children from their mothers' arms and send those children off to detention camps hundreds of miles away.

Something is amiss with a theology that celebrates Christ's suffering on the cross but sanctions the suffering of neighbors on our southern border.

Something is wrong with a Christianity that keeps the captive captive, the blind blind, the poor poor, and the oppressed oppressed.

Something is wrong with a faith that labels itself "evangelical" but is devoid of good news.

When Pilate ordered that sign to go above our Lord as he hung upon that awful tree, he meant to mock Christ's kingship. "The King of the Jews," said the sign in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. It was supposed to be a cruel joke to accompany the cruelest of deaths.

That sign is a reminder to all of us that Rome killed Jesus for the perceived crime of sedition. But, as we all know, Pilate was right without knowing it.

Jesus *is* the King. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the Son of God who suffered and died to set us free. He is the risen Christ who died once for all and summons us to the ministry of justice as well as reconciliation.

To the Son, and to the Father, and to the Spirit, one-in-three and three-in-one, be all honor and glory now and forever.

