



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 3 (B)

Another Way

[RCL] Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

“Many are saying, ‘Oh, that we might see better times!’” The Psalmist’s words ring just as true now as they have throughout the centuries since they were written. The news is full of war, climate crisis, political polarization, violence, and suffering. It often feels impossible to see a way forward that will end in global peace. Communities feel torn apart. The future feels bleak.

One of the themes that connects the readings for the day helps to name that darkness and bleakness out there in the world: sin. Sin is a funny word. Many Christians — including priests and theologians — shy away from the language of sin these days. It is understandable why the word often gets swept under the rug. Fire and brimstone preachers have weaponized the language of sin to diminish people’s conceptions of themselves, branding their hearers as depraved sinners, unworthy of love.

There are serious pastoral and theological reasons to abandon that kind of “turn or burn” sermons. And yet, in the move away from regular preaching about sin, a vacuum opens up and our ability to name what is wrong with the world becomes diminished. Confronting sin is always uncomfortable and unsettling, but it is a necessary part of the Christian story. The texts today, when taken together, say something deeply profound about the nature of sin.

The first thing about sin these texts raise is that it is corporate. While wrongdoing can be and is done at the individual level, when these passages talk about sin, they talk about something done as a group. When Peter is preaching in Acts, he uses the second person plural to speak of sin: “All of you rejected Jesus; all of you rejected the holy and righteous one.” Here, Peter is speaking of a group failing to do the right thing. Peter does not single out any individual from the mob that called for the crucifixion.

One of the most beautiful things about humans is that we like to group and cluster together. It’s a survival mechanism that, at its best, allows for communal enterprises and mutual flourishing of all people. And yet, at its worst, this tendency to group and cluster has led humans to form mobs that destabilize communities, harm the most vulnerable, and hijack rational decision-making processes. 1 John teaches that “sin is

lawlessness.” The Greek text reflects an ambiguity in whether or not this law-breaking is intentional or done in ignorance. Nevertheless, sin is when humans turn from the way of justice to the way of mob rule.

How many of the problems in the world or in our communities arise because of mob-like behavior? The harm of bullying, and now cyber-bullying, can be traumatizing and tragic when the mob singles out its prey. Dehumanization of the other or of the scapegoat happens when one turns over one’s moral compass to the mob. That kind of dehumanization has led to all kind of horrors across the globe throughout history. The history of the United States is marred by the formation of lynch mobs preying upon vulnerable people — Chinese immigrants, Black Americans, Catholics, LGBT people, and Native Americans. Around the world, different forms of genocide are perpetrated against those in the out-group. Every war and conflict relies on the individual surrendering their morality to a violent mob.

But, like the Psalmist, we cling to the hope that there are better times in the future. A second lesson about sin is that redemption is also corporate. Peter tells the crowd gathered there that sin is not the final word in their story. He preaches, “And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers...Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.” Here he similarly uses the second person plural form of ‘you’.

In essence, he is saying something like, “All of you participated in the mob before. But there’s a better way to be together in community.” Indeed, there’s a better way of being, even with those who are not part of your community. In God’s power, love can overcome sin. There’s an antidote to letting the worst of our human tendencies run rampant.

And that antidote is the third important lesson about sin. “Sinner” is not an identity. We are not sinners. That is not at our core who we are, despite what Jonathan Edwards and others might preach. The author of 1 John is clear about that: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are...Beloved, we are God's children now.” Who we are matters. We are part of the family of God, and we are called to spread that message throughout the entire world.

In the gospel reading from Luke, Jesus tells his disciples after his resurrection, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” There is good news in the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness. If sin is communal and derives from letting a mob mentality hijack our morality, redemption happens when we live out of our identity as God’s kin. When we bask in the love of the divine and rest in the knowledge that God loves us, our perception of the world can begin to change. And it is not just our perception of the world that changes, but our relationships within it start to shift as well. Instead of seeing the Other that needs to be punished or brought into line, we see as God sees. We seek as God seeks, looking for ways to show love and mercy, not death and destruction.

The proclamation of the gospel across the world is not that others need to become like us. The good news is not that everyone is already the same. There are real differences that divide and separate us. The good news is that the brokenness around us does not have the final say. The good news is that, as we bask in God's love, we can identify when and where we are letting the mob rule in our thoughts, hearts, and actions. There is another way.

Through God's love, we stumble together through the darkness, learning together how to be God's family. As the church, as individuals, and as groups, we've made mistakes. We've given ourselves as individuals over to the whims of the mob. We've let differences become an excuse for structural, symbolic, and material violence. In that way, we've given ourselves over to lawlessness. But those mistakes do not have the final word on who we are. God's love has the first and last say on our identity, and that identity is love. This divine way of being is not about sappy, romantic, or abstract love, but a love that leads to a real change within us.

The texts for today, and the chorus of holy Scripture, attest that God came in love to give life. When we find ourselves longing for better days, when we find ourselves in the bleak despair that the world is marred beyond all repair, there is yet hope. There are real, material harms perpetrated in the world. We name that as sin. And we proclaim that sin is not the end of the story. We proclaim who we are: a people whose identity is grounded in a divine love that pulls us out of our darkest days and from our darkest impulses. As 1 John says, "We should be called children of God. And that is what we are."

Amen.

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