

#AlternativeFaith: *Unmasking Idols*

Matthew 5:10-12, 7:13-20

One of the interesting oddities about Christianity is that most Christians seem to have a better understanding and explanation for how we get from Friday to Sunday than for how we get from Sunday to Friday. What I'm referring to is not a typical weekend or a normal seven days—rather, the Friday of Holy Week and the Sundays that bookend it.

What I mean is, Christian tradition has based more of its identity, theology, ecclesiology, and proclamation on what happened between Good Friday and Easter—a period of time from which we have little anecdotal evidence—than on the days from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, of which we have plenty of biblical narrative. We showcase in very compelling ways the religious hope that Christ brings in his resurrection from the dead (which, when you think about it, is an incredible and unprovable claim to make!), but struggle to grasp or convey (or even accept) the prior circumstances and reasons for why Jesus was crucified in the first place—why he went from a public parade of palms on Sunday to a humiliating and gruesome death as an ostracized enemy of the state five days later.

Why is this? Is it because the biblical drama doesn't make sense to us—that we can't wrap our mind around why such a good, decent, and benevolent man should be arrested and put to death without a fighting chance, or that his public image and reputation would take such a nosedive without any justifiable cause? Or is it that Jesus' last days on earth represent something we find disturbing and unappealing—yes, stress and conflict, blood and violence, betrayal and sorrow, but also his prophetic challenge and judgment? It may explain why most people simply bypass

the days of Passion Week to show up solely for each Sunday's celebration. Who's not a fan of good times?

To be fair, Holy Week isn't pretty. The arrest, trial, and death of Jesus were brutally real, cruel, and sobering. Sometimes, our Hollywood-inspired imaginations get it right but, on the whole, religious tradition tends to smooth over the worst effects by framing it all with theological romance. The story becomes one about God's amazing love for humanity and Jesus' supreme and noble sacrifice where, as God's only Begotten Son, he resolutely and heroically submits to his destiny to die as a final and absolute atonement for human sin. This whole week was choreographed by heaven—it had to happen; it was God's will and plan for salvation, we're told. All the characters in this drama were following a predestined script, written before the days of creation, so Christian tradition says. With Christ's bloody and redemptive death, divine forgiveness is made possible and issued to all who seek it, who are then assured of being raised to everlasting and blissful life, symbolized by Easter's empty tomb. What this means is, Jesus' death on the cross amounts to little more than a "get out of hell" card! That's why the Christian Gospel has been so popular; that's why Easter is so appealing. Who wouldn't want to accept a bargain like this—to know that death isn't the end before they take their final breath? Any fool would take that!

Except, I don't believe this was the reality behind Jesus' last days. I don't even believe it to be the Gospel as Jesus proclaimed it or intended. Certainly, that's what you will come up with if all you are considering is Friday to Sunday—the Gospel is only about God's plan to deliver us from death. But, then, that doesn't seem to account for what the days from Sunday to Friday suggest—what they lead us to believe.

If all we had in this story were the days leading up to Jesus' death on the cross, the lasting impression of what Jesus is all about might be quite different than what Christian tradition proclaims. If we only had Jesus' life and ministry to work with—one that results in him dying on a Roman cross, we would see him as many of his contemporaries did: a leader of a movement, a social activist, a religious teacher, a remarkable healer, maybe a great prophet. The summary of his life would be this: Jesus' tortuous death is the consequence and cost of *truth-telling*, and what occurred to him has happened to many others throughout history, including his disciples. When a person speaks truth to power, when one stands up for what is right, when anyone pushes enough buttons to be perceived as a threat to the way things are, then all the manipulative machinery and punitive powers of governments and institutions go into action to put down and squelch the threat to defend and stabilize the status quo. It's no surprise that social prophets and whistleblowers are usually the targets of public scorn and persecution, instead of being the corrective voices and transformational presence they are meant to be. They are the ones for whom these verses are spoken:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

These words came to mind over the last few days with the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's speech, "A Time to Break Silence," delivered at The Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967—exactly a year to the day from when King would be assassinated. In his stirring deliverance, King boldly unmasked the idols of his time and spoke out against the Johnson administration, the Vietnam War, racism, and the corrupting influences and interests of wealth and

materialism. With his voice reverberating through the nave of this great religious edifice, King proclaimed a truth that still haunts us today:

As I have walked among the desperate, rejected and angry young men I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. ...But they asked—and rightly so—what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government...

Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken—the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investment.

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered...

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood.¹

His message made perfect sense for the time, but it was not well received. King was harshly criticized in the mainstream press, and by the Johnson administration, and even by some of his friends and colleagues for linking the injustices related to war and the economy with those of civil rights. How can he speak about the war, they said, if he is a civil rights leader? Yet, for King, they were one in the same rooted in the idolatry of his time. Over the next year, King faced increasing opposition because, in the background of the volatile Presidential campaign of 1968, he kept unmasking the idolatry of America's fascination with wealth and excessive profit-making,

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” in *A Testament of Hope*, James Washington, ed., Harper & Row, 1986, pp. 240, 241.

along with the militarism of both political parties, of incessant racism, and the manipulation of those in powerful places to control public opinion. A year later, while in Memphis, King sensed his fate, if you recall, just like Jesus knew his. We know what it was. In a matter of hours, King was shot to death by an assassin. Just like Jesus, a dead hero is more beloved than a living one.

Despite his critics, King was not troubling the waters for personal notoriety. His prophetic courage, as he stated many times, came from his faith, deeply rooted in the teachings and example of Jesus, following his way through the storms and trials of taking on the powers that be. Jesus provided a powerful witness of truth-telling even to his dying day—a witness that would prove costly. For Jesus, we must remember, it was the days leading to Friday that told his story.

Luke tells us that shortly after the parade of palms, as Jesus neared the city gates, he literally wept over Jerusalem, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” Then, as Jesus entered the city and reached the temple, his emotions rose up and he drove out the moneychangers with the rage of a prophet: “My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of thieves.”

The days of that fateful week unfolded with many challenges that Jesus posed to the religious and civic leaders. They questioned his authority—by what right did he have to challenge their positions or practices? They tried to trap Jesus into saying something for which they could publicly call him out and denounce him. Then, the messianic fervor building around his movement became worrisome to the Herodians and other political leaders, who grew nervous about Jewish rebel movements

rising up during the fiercely nationalistic festival of Passover. Spies were sent out to uncover anything which could be construed as seditious—potentially another grassroots insurrection against the imperial order.

Throughout the week, Jesus' popularity grew as he boldly spoke out against the powers that be—scribes, Pharisees, chief priests, elders, Sanhedrin, wealthy elite—calling principally his own nation into account for their institutional corruption, exploitation of the poor, and their evident religious and political hypocrisy. His oft-repeated teachings garnered a following in the countryside, but became sharply pointed and relevant once voiced in the centers of Jerusalem's power:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits... A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, you will know them by their fruits.

In the combustible atmosphere of occupied Judea, with Rome ready to clamp down on any unrest, what did this mean—that “trees” that are “bad” are “cut down”? By itself, it could mean anything, proverbial as it was. But then, in the temple courtyard, every day Jesus was preaching of a time to come when the city itself would be surrounded by armies and destroyed, including the temple!

When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. (Lk. 21:9)

In Jerusalem, this amounted to treachery—blasphemy even—a direct threat upon the religious establishment, not to mention *Pax Romana* and Rome's “beneficent oversight” of Judea! Among the elite in the nation's capital, Jesus, along with his poor people's campaign, posed a clear and present danger.

And, as we know, they found a way to take him down—a willing collaborator named Judas, one of his own. By Thursday evening, in the stealth of the night, led by their paid informant, temple guards arrested Jesus outside the city walls. From there, the last hours of Jesus’ life unfolded in the manner of a criminal felon or rebel—with several interrogations, false accusations and charges, physical torture and verbal abuse, and public shame and ridicule, including a razor-sharp crown of thorns mockingly forced down upon his head before parading him out in clownish fashion before nailing him to a cross.

The government’s intent was that Jesus, like others, would serve as an example by hanging naked along the main road outside the city walls until death, whereupon vultures would eat the flesh off his bones. It was a horrible way to die in public. Crucifixion was the imperial form of punishment—a disgrace imposed for capital crimes—a brutal, suffocating, humiliating example for would-be lawbreakers. This is how the dominant and powerful exercise their contempt for those who would challenge their authority and threaten their state. They not only eliminate the threat, they exact their vengeance to utter shame. There was nothing remotely romantic about Jesus’ fate; only for his enemies did it appear to be a good Friday.

Frankly, when we follow Jesus from Sunday to Friday, we will begin to understand what brought Jesus to the cross. Only when we grasp that, will we begin to comprehend the impact and message of Easter. Not until we have absorbed the clash that exists between human power and divine power will we realize that the resurrection is, first and foremost, a divine response to Jesus’ death and the oppressive powers behind it. That is the primary message of Easter: that it’s not a universal “get-out-of-hell” card;

instead, it's the Gospel's promised Great Reversal of fortune for those who have suffered wrongly and unjustly in this age. Easter is about Jesus' vindication! One cannot fully comprehend the surprise and joy of Easter until one suffers through the harsh reality of what brought Jesus to Friday.

Because the end of the week is directly and integrally connected to the days prior, the implications, as I see them, are far more demanding than most Christians want to hear. The resurrection of Sunday is a hopeful declaration and promise to those who face their own version of "Friday"—those who have dared to accept the cost of discipleship and are willing to stand up for what is right, even if it brings a heavy cross to bear—even if it costs them their lives in doing so, literally or figuratively. It's not the free pass of forgiveness that many sell it to be—not the "cheap grace" as Bonhoeffer poignantly warned about. It's a promise for those who won't yield to the idolatry of the world and of their times—those who won't place a greater value on acquiring wealth, or dominance, or vengeance, or the manipulative interests of power, over the dignity and welfare of human life (particularly the most vulnerable). The resurrection is intended for those who haven't sold their souls to these lesser gods.

What that means is, the resurrection isn't the wide highway to heaven so many assume it to be brought about by a universal atonement; it's a narrow path revealing the essential truth of life: we live this life as spiritual beings on a human journey—one that tests the expanse and inclusiveness of our love for others, our exercise of justice and mercy, our willingness to proclaim the truth at whatever cost, and our example of humility, generosity, and grace throughout the course of our days. For these are the values of God. Whoever embodies them has a divine call and invitation to

live again. That's who grace is principally for—grace that is life-changing and world-shaking. And Easter's empty tomb proves this to be true.

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