Sermon for The Third Sunday of Easter

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, May 5, 2019

Text: Acts 9:1-20

Title: Seeing the light

Early in an intensive four-month internship as a Hospital Chaplain, my supervisor had our cohort of trainees watch the 2004 film Crash. Set in Los Angeles, the film weaves together vignettes of seemingly unrelated people as their lives bump into, and sometimes collide into, one another, showing heartbreaking, humiliating, horrifyingly human moments: people pushed to the edge by accidents, assumptions, attacks, acting out of their worst instincts and, moments later, making surprising turns.

Two African-American men carjack the white DA and his beautiful wife, who erupts in a racist tirade when they finally arrive home, which spills over to include not only the men who attacked them, but people of color everywhere, including the Hispanic locksmith down the hall securing their home who hears her say he’s probably a gangster. But later in the film, the wife collapses, sobbing about how angry she is all the time and how utterly at a loss she is as to why. And suddenly, while the things she said are still utterly repugnant, we see this mean, privileged person as a profoundly lonely and confused middle-aged woman, not at all sure who she is, disappointed with life and herself, not knowing where or at what to direct this frustration. Two white police officers pull over a fancy car carrying a well-to-do couple of color. The wife, who had one glass of wine too many, mouths off at one of the cops, who forces them out of the car and subjects her to a humiliating and invasive body search. But later we see that same cop return home to care for his beloved and dying father, truly tender with and clearly devoted to this bedridden, bitter old man, and he is gentle and generous in the face of bedwetting and dementia, and we come to understand how utterly powerless he feels, and how he victimizes others as a way to control something – anything – in his life, as he feels impotent in the face of the one thing that matters most to him. Later the Hispanic locksmith appears again, actually suspected of being a drug dealer and gang leader by the police, just as the DA’s wife thought, but it turns out the only place he breaks into is his young daughters pillow fort, which he crawls into to put her to bed with soft words and softer kisses.

As the film builds and we learn more and more about everyone involved, we see how all their lives are intertwined. How the pain and loneliness, the misunderstanding and hatred,
experienced in one arena affects their behavior in another, and we glimpse how reactive, cruel words and deeds make waves that ripple outward, upending and overturning countless lives along the way. After watching Crash and reflecting as a group about what we’d observed, our supervisor noted that everyone in the film was both – in the infamous words of Martin Luther – sinner and saint. Not a single person was all good. Not a single person was all evil. Which made their goodness and their badness so much harder to take in, so much harder to sit with, and so much more real. Crash did a wonderful, terrible job of depicting the complexity of human nature and human relationships, as we draw near to each other in kindness and concern, as we ricochet off each other in rejection and resentment.

This mattered to us as hospital chaplains, because we often entered people’s lives precisely when things had fallen apart, which meant we got to see them at their best and at their worst: right after the accident, the heart attack, the assault. And sometimes our patients were the victims, the innocent, the bystanders, and sometimes they were the villain, the perpetrator, the thug, and we were called to companion and converse and comfort them either way. (Even this pairing elides the fact that many perpetrators have been victims, and many victims, perpetrators, at one point or another.) But remembering that we are all saint and sinner, all capable of kindness and conceit, sometimes innocent and sometimes not, also matters to us simply as human beings, whether we are Chaplains or Christians or none of the above, especially in a world and a time as volatile and violent and vulnerable as our own.

As I’ve prayed for all those affected by religiously motivated violence in recent weeks - our Jewish siblings targeted in Southern California, our Muslim siblings in New Zealand and in Sunnyvale, and particularly the hundreds of Christian saints and others in Sri Lanka whose lives were lost or forever changed by the bombings on Easter morning, I find myself first holding in love the dead and the mourning and those who live in fear of ongoing persecution, and then I find myself thinking about the perpetrators of such crimes. Obviously, these acts of violence are, themselves, utterly repugnant. Indefensible. Evil. Motivated by the worst kinds of desperation and ignorance and hate. But to watch the news or listen to most commentators is to fall immediately into dehumanizing “them” as “the enemy” of all moral, thoughtful, good and God-fearing people everywhere, and as much as I am mighty tempted to draw a line and say “those people over there are bad and irredeemable” – as much as there is something that seems like it
would keep me safe in thinking that way – the story of my faith tells me otherwise. The hope of my faith tells me otherwise.

Because every time I have ever tried to draw that line in real life, to separate out who is clearly good and who is clearly bad, I keep finding Jesus hanging out with those I’d judge most harshly of all. I keep finding Jesus offering tough love and fierce blessings to people who least want his company and seem to least deserve it – including those who persecuted and put him to death, a truth that is moving on Good Friday and downright offensive when it confronts us in real time. And of course, ever so frustratingly, when I have tried to draw that line it always runs right down the middle of me, too, because I, like the DA’s wife and corrupt cop in Crash, like good old Martin Luther himself, am also always saint and sinner.

And so, I find it no accident at all that today’s lectionary appointed for us the conversion of Saul - whom we all know better as Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, to whom most of the New Testament is attributed, without whom it is hard to imagine the Christian religion cohering and expanding as it did - and who, as we heard this morning, was himself a perpetrator of religiously-motivated violence. Now, let’s be very clear, because often matters of degree really do affect our thinking on this. I mean, sure, we can forgive – or at least imagine forgiving – a white lie, a little manipulation, the casual affair, the desperate deeds of an addict. But a murderer? Someone who crushes their opponents or took part in the slave trade or assaults a subject of their kingdom? It’s a bridge too far. It’s asking too much.

But then we look back at Christian history and, the sorry truth is, most of our heroes - many of our saints – are, indeed, guilty of just these sorts of sins. I mean, Moses was a murderer. He was actually on the run, hiding away, when God spoke to him out of the burning bush. And no, he had not made amends. He had not done his time. And God still chose to work with and through him, leading Israel out of Egypt. And Joshua, well, if you linger too long in the books immediately following Deuteronomy, you can’t help but notice that his campaigns were a tad bit on the genocidal side, and yet he is the hero who finally led Israel into the promised land. And David – well, let’s just say he would be an easy target in today’s #MeToo movement for his treatment of Bathsheba. And he also murdered her upright and innocent husband, let’s not forget. And this is just a random sampling from our tradition. These were not perfect people. They all did terrible, terrible – not just kind of sort of bad but terrible – things.
So, Saul, well, Saul was in good company, I suppose, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” eagerly persecuting the followers of “the way,” as the early Jesus movement was called. Earlier in the book of Acts we see him standing by, not only doing nothing but presumably cheering on, the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian Martyr, and today he is zealously arranging the necessary paperwork to arrest, and ultimate execute, other Christians. He did terrible, terrible - not just kind of sort of bad but terrible - things. And God, in one of those dizzying and confounding moments so characteristic of the life of faith, decides to call him. And Saul sees a light before he, days later, sees the light, and Jesus appears to him, asking him why he is persecuting him. Saul is temporarily debilitated by the encounter, blind and disoriented, unable to eat or drink. When God calls to Ananias, a Christian, and tells him to go to Saul, Ananias hesitates, wanting to be sure God realizes who this guy is and what he is guilty of, “how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem,” in Sri Lanka and Charlotte, in Sutherland Springs and Peshawar.

But God says simply, as God had said countless times throughout salvation history, “Go.” God has a plan for Saul. God has chosen to work through this most unpromising person and this most unpromising set of affairs. God will make a way. So Ananias goes – faithfully, fearfully – and as we are so often called to do, he draws near to Saul: close enough to touch him, to smell him, to see his pores. Close enough to lay hands on him, risking so much more than his safety but his very life, his identity, his reputation, with this touch (like those who unbound Lazarus and set him free as he stumbled from the tomb), and, incredibly, in his own way, Saul comes back to life. The scales fall from his eyes. He can see and he can see, and he is baptized and a new life begins. This is a story of resurrection.

Saul was a perpetrator of religious violence. He did terrible, terrible things. And he would go on to be arguably the single most influential Christian in history. Now that fact does not make the terrible things Saul did any less terrible. And in no way does it mean God willed or wanted or was working through those terrible things. To say God can redeem all darkness is not to say that God condones it. But it is to say that our darkness is not a deterrent to God, who has managed and continues to manage to work good things – even salvation – out through us very broken people.

And for me - in this time or terror and tragedy, traumas and truth-tellings, when so many around the world are suffering and struggling, and so many are also having scales fall from their
eyes, seeing the light for the first time – for me, this story gives me hope. Saul’s story reminds me that God’s ways are not our ways. God’s way is different. That ours is a God who, when we would least expect it, can turn hearts and change minds. That ours is a God who, before we have any reason to think our enemy could be anything other than our enemy, is already at work, already turning the world upside down. Which in no way diminishes the darkness around up, but rather affirms that our darkness is never – never - more powerful than God’s love.

At the heart of Jesus’ teaching, right up to and even after his death and resurrection, was this insistence that, in the words of theologian Brain McLaren, “violence does not defeat violence; hate cannot defeat fear; domination cannot defeat domination … God must achieve victory through defeat, glory through shame, strength through weakness, leadership through servanthood, and life trough death.”

God’s way is different. If we’d prefer to give up on the bad guys, the evildoers, the enemy – to other and withdraw, to respond in kind or grow in hate - then God probably has something else entirely in mind, because God’s ways are not our ways. And even when some part of me struggles this truth and chafes against it, I have to acknowledge that never once in the history of the universe has darkness driven out darkness – only light can do that. And so, I hold out hope. I stand in trust. And I keep looking for signs of the dawn.

Christians and countless other people of faith around the world are grieving. We are hurt. We are wounded. We are heartbroken. And we stand in love and solidarity with those most closely affected by the recent waves of violence. But we are not without hope: for our world, for each other, and even for those who would do us harm. We are not without hope: for a better tomorrow, a brighter future, and surprising turns of heart. For we trust in a God creative enough to bring joy out of sorrow and life out of death. A God who is undeterred by our darkness and undaunted by our sin. A God who is already turning the world around, and calling to us to join in. Amen.

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