

Sermon: Passion As Parable  
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-On-Hudson, NY  
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Good morning.

This is an extraordinary time liturgically. We are in the cusp between the promise of Easter and the inspiration of Pentecost. And I have been spending some time -- quite a bit, actually -- trying to imagine what this time must have been like for those first Jewish Christians. But to do this takes some work. I am going to ask us to try to do that work together this morning.

This work is hard because it requires us to look beyond what is familiar, common, and obvious to see what lies just beneath the surface. I'll give you an example of what I mean. This example comes from the world of film.

One of the things that is most interesting in looking at films from the very beginnings of the medium in the early years of the 20th century is to see the development of the language of film -- the way that information is conveyed and stories are told.

One very early film tells the story of the rescue of a mother and her children who are trapped from a burning tenement building. The film opens on the interior of the apartment with firemen breaking into the apartment to find the family in a panic. The brave firemen are able to get the family out of the inferno before it's too late. The scene then switches to the outside of the building, where we see the same action from this new angle. The firemen that we have just seen come in through the window are now climbing up a ladder and perform their rescue for the second time. We literally see the same "story" told twice, one time after another.

Watching this movie is jarring because we have become so used to a scene like this cutting between the desperation of the mother inside the apartment to the actions of the brave firemen as they struggle to get into the apartment and back and forth until the happy ending.

So let's see what we can do to imagine what the time just after the execution of Jesus might have been like for those first Jewish Christians.

To do this, we are going to have to do two things: first, we will need to unwind a good deal of what we already know, what we have been taught, and

what we have accepted in our tradition; and second, we will need to get a sense of the world in which Jesus and his companions lived.

Those first Jewish Christians had to face the horrible reality of Jesus' execution without the benefit any liturgical tradition. They did not yet have a Creed. The Nicene Creed with which we are so familiar was not accepted until almost the fourth century. They did not have a New Testament. These books would not be collected and made part of the canon until the third century. In fact, there were no books to collect. Paul's letters were not compiled until the 5th decade of that first century, twenty years after the crucifixion. And the four canonical Gospels, were written in the 7th, 8th and 9th decades of that first century, forty to seventy years after the execution of Jesus.

Now, let's try to get a sense of the world in which Jesus and his companions lived.

The Holy Land and its surrounding cities and towns were under Roman occupation, as they had been for about 100 years. The Romans appointed a series of local governors. We are probably most familiar with Herod, who we are told in the Gospels first feared the birth of the Christ and then became a key player in his execution. Jerusalem was an occupied city.

The governor was empowered to select the Jewish High Priest, adding a significant religious dimension to the other issues of identity and autonomy. The governor and High Priests could easily be seen as Roman collaborators rather than true Jews.

The all consuming Roman Empire brought its economics of agricultural commercialism to the region, as it did elsewhere. And, as it did elsewhere, commercialism served to produce a movement from the poverty inherent in agrarian peasantry to the destitution of the newly landless. It is into this world that Jesus arrives.

So, what did Jesus preach about?

He could have preached a return to the Jewish Laws and traditions as a way of purifying the people, as had the prophets before him. And while there are places in the Gospel where He preached a vision of an apocalypse - the end of the world-- I have trouble believing that this was a central part of his message. And he could have fomented rebellion against the Roman occupiers, which others certainly did. He did none of these things.

Instead, he did something remarkable.

In the face of political oppression and economic ruin he boldly declared that the Kingdom of God was already present, here and now. And that anyone could participate in it.

Take a moment and think about his world and see if you can imagine just how strange this message must have seemed. With the Roman sandals on the throats of a destitute, increasingly landless people, he proclaimed a Kingdom of God in which justice and compassion would be the hallmarks.

Imagine being in that world and hearing the Sermon on the Mount. A relatively new translation of the Four Gospels of which I am very fond, attempts to capture the shock intended in this message:

“Congratulations, you poor!  
God’s domain belongs to you.  
Congratulations you hungry,  
You will have a feast.  
Congratulations you who weep now!  
You will laugh”  
(Luke 6:20-21)

His message was so strange that Jesus had to use a special way of speaking to convey his vision for the Kingdom of God -- Jesus spoke to his companions in parables. We have become so used to understanding parables as charming stories and folk wisdom that they can lose their teeth and the power of their initial impact.

Imagine being a dispossessed, landless person -- someone completely destitute and without any real future -- and hearing the story of the Vineyard laborers. This is the story where the owner of a vineyard hires laborers throughout the day. It is only at the end of the day that the workers discover that each is paid for a full day’s labor. Imagine how much this would have violated Jesus’ listeners’ sense of reality.

How else did Jesus demonstrate his vision of the Kingdom of God?

He ate with people -- all people. Regardless of their purity or social status. We can hardly imagine how shocking this must have been until we consider the ritual purity laws required by Judaism, and the social status at play in the Roman Empire. Only then can we begin to get a sense of just how revolutionary this practice of eating with anyone must have been. And just how powerful an expression of God’s justice and compassion.

And, how else did Jesus demonstrate his vision of the Kingdom of God?

Lastly, Jesus made real his vision of the Kingdom of God by healing. [insert example here] There are two remarkable aspects of the healing that Jesus performs. First, he does the healing directly, and not as an intercessor between God and the afflicted. And second, the healing, apart from any other benefits to the suffering, serves to reconnect the afflicted, who have almost certainly been marginalized, to his community. He even told stories of healing. In the Kingdom of God, a shepherd will go after even one lost sheep, and even the return of a prodigal son will be celebrated. Those lost would be rescued.

The intention of Jesus' program, as I see it, was to make real the Kingdom of God here and now through the practices of communal eating, healing, and welcoming. The program WAS the intention. A renowned New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan has pointed out:

“Those companions are not told to bring everyone back to Jesus, as if he alone had the Kingdom of God. They are told to live in a certain way and thereby enter or live that Kingdom's presence just as Jesus himself is doing. They are also told to invite others to do likewise.”

We can, then, begin to get a sense of the community that formed around Jesus. People who shared with one another their own vision for the Kingdom of God, which was right here and right now. A Kingdom where the last would be first. They ate together, and with others; they healed each other; they rescued the outcast.

And it is onto this community that the shock and horror of the execution of Jesus comes. Other peoples used crucifixion as a form of humiliation -- the already dead victims would be displayed as a warning to others. The Romans, however, upped the ante but using crucifixion as both the means of execution AND humiliation. This is the terrible death that Jesus faced.

Imagine the shock that must have filled the community of Jesus' companions, the sense of loss and hopelessness.

There was not yet a tradition to comfort them. And there was no Scripture that proclaimed the Good News. And there was no leadership. After all, we are told that the 12 scattered, fearing for their own lives.

So what did these companions of Jesus do?

I believe they wept and grieved and comforted one another. They prayed together. And I believe that they continued to proclaim the presence of the Kingdom of God. And I believe that they made the Kingdom real by eating together, healing one another, and rescuing the outcast.

And, in so doing, they BECAME the Resurrection, long before there was any tradition or liturgy to give it credence. They were, in the truest sense, Pentecostals, filled with an experience of the Kingdom of God, which they demonstrated by following Jesus and his program. As we read today in Acts: "...they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him."

They are to me a living parable.

I pray that we may have their courage. To be bold enough to share with one another a vision of the Kingdom of God. To welcome others to our table, whether those others live in a Red State or a Blue State or an Islamic State, and allow ourselves to be welcomed to others' tables. And to welcome the afflicted and the lost back into the community. May we so boldly seek to create a world of justice and compassion.

Amen.