

**“A Cup of Cold Water,” Pentecost 4, July 2, 2017, FPC  
Marshfield.**

Texts: Gen. 22:1-4, Ps. 13, Rom 6:12-23, Mt. 10:40-42

I spent this last week at the Washington Island Forum. The featured speaker was one of my favorite biblical scholars, John Dominic Crossan. We have watched a lot of his videos at adult forums, often with the late Marcus Borg. They have collaborated a lot in their work about the historical Jesus and the environment in which he lived.

The featured book for the week was How to Read the Bible and still be a Christian. Most of us who read the Bible or hear it in church have noticed that there are contradictions in it. Many human authors, while inspired by God, have presented different views. I have heard many say that the Old Testament presents a violent God and the New Testament a loving God. However, we find many passages in the OT that describe God as “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” In the New Testament, the Jesus of the Gospels and the Jesus of Paul is loving and gracious, but also seeking justice, especially for the poorest

and most vulnerable among us. Jesus resists injustice, but he does it in a non-violent way. But the Jesus of Revelation is a warrior riding on a white horse, sword in hand, riding in blood up to the bridles of the horses. Yes, there is a lovely vision of peace in Rev. 21-22, but it is brought about through violence. So what is going on here?

Crossan’s main word for the week was “matrix,” or we might say “context.” Throughout the history of Israel, the small country lay in between the great empires of the world, who were constantly at war with one another. Over and over they marched through the little land on the way to battle with each other. First, Israel escaped from Egypt. Once in the promised land, they fought many wars with the other tribes of the area, especially the Canaanites. After the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel split into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Assyrians conquered the North. The Babylonians conquered the South. The Persians conquered the Babylonians and restored the land of Judah to the people who had been carried off into exile. Then there were the Macedonians, led by Alexander the Great, the Greeks, and the Romans, who ruled Israel at the time of Jesus.

In the first and second century, Jews revolted four times against the Romans. John the Baptizer and Jesus were not among the violent revolutionaries, though John spoke in violent, apocalyptic language—“You brood of vipers,...”the axe is laid to the root of the tree.” Jesus practiced non-violent resistance, similar to that practiced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, and others. This is not pacifism, it is not non-resistance. They are willing to die for what they think is right, but they will not fight back. Borg and Crossan, in their book, The Last Week, have a wonderful comparison of Jesus and Pilate on what we call Palm Sunday. Jesus rides peacefully into town on a donkey, perhaps one nursing a colt, with his followers waving palm branches. Pilate and his cohort ride in from the Praetorium on war horses with chariots and swords. Jesus demonstraes peace through justice; Pilate represents the Pax Romana, peace through victory.

To understand this fully, we need to look at the definitions of justice. Many of us, when we use the word, tend to think of retributive justice. We think of punishment for crimes or for disobedience. Jesus is talking about

distributive justice, of everyone receiving enough of what they need, a fair share of the necessities of life.

Now, let us take a look at our readings for today in the light of this context. We didn't read the OT lesson, which was Gen. 22:1-14, Abraham's near-sacrifice of his beloved son, Isaac. The stories of Genesis were greatly influenced by other cultures of the Middle East and Fertile Crescent, and these cultures had moved from human sacrifice to the use of animal sacrifice to offer their best to their gods. In this story, Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac when God provides a ram stuck in a thicket. Animal sacrifice continued as an important part of Israel's worship until the fall of the Temple in 66 C.E. However, the prophets frequently criticized the Israelites for placing all their emphasis on sacrifice while ignoring the practice of distributive justice, for example the well-known passage from Amos 5:21-24:

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings  
And grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
And the offerings of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
And righteousness like an everflowing stream.

The passage from Romans 6 follows the one that we read last week about baptism. We go down into the waters of baptism to die with Christ and we rise with him to new life. Crossan says that this is talking about our life now, not life after death. We no longer live according to sin, according to the normalcy of civilization, but we live in Christ. We are still slaves, as was the case in the Roman Empire, but we are a new kind of slaves, to our calling in Christ, to our living in justice and righteousness. Instead of living to death, we now live to sanctification. No longer do we live to sin, but to eternal life, beginning now, in Christ Jesus.

I want to divert again to discuss the word "sin" as Crossan described it. He believes that the Western Church, beginning with Augustine, has misinterpreted "original sin." In the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, there is no mention of sin. Rather, he interprets eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as the way that we became human. We did not lose immortality by Adam and Eve's

eating of the tree; we never had it. What we did learn was that human beings do not care for others or seek justice and peace by instinct, but by learning the way of compassion.

When Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden, they have all the qualities of human beings, mortality, necessity to work, the pain of childbirth, but also the possibility of compassion and caring for one another and for the earth.

The word Sin actually appears for the first time in Genesis 4, the story of Cain and Abel. The farmer Cain killed the shepherd Abel. Cain was the elder brother, Abel the younger. In contrast to patriarchal society's primogeniture, God always prefers the younger. We see that in several of the other Genesis stories, such as Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and Benjamin and the other sons of Jacob, etc. When God sees that Cain has killed Abel, he doesn't punish him, but the very ground cries out with Abel's blood. Sin is escalatory violence. Revenge continues to escalate until it is seven times seven. The law in Leviticus calls for "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," not ever-increasing violence. In the honor and shame culture of the Neolithic age, this was more like a blood feud than a war, like the Hatfields and the McCoys

in Appalachian history. The Cain and Abel story represents the shift from a hunter-gatherer culture to an agricultural culture. It represents the dawn of civilization.

So sin is more about violence than sex, and it is more about the story of Cain and Abel than about Adam and Eve. As I mentioned at the beginning, Crossan believes that the call of the Gospels is for non-violent resistance to injustice, but human writers, in the normalcy of civilization, have redefined God and Jesus as practitioners of violence and punishment rather than to steadfast love, grace and mercy, care for the vulnerable, and distributive justice.

Our passage for today from Matthew 10 is a continuation of last week's call to mission. Sometimes the call will create family conflict or community conflict. If we are responding to Jesus' call, we have to take up our own crosses, to work through conflict in a peaceful, respectful way, something we seem to be forgetting in much of our discourse today. God cares about all of humanity and all creation, even the sparrows. This last part is about welcoming all, just as we sang at the beginning: "God welcomes all, strangers and friends; God's love is strong and it never ends."

The Levitical law called us to welcome the alien and the stranger. Yet many seem to be afraid of strangers today. We are afraid of refugees fleeing war and violence. We are afraid of immigrants from Africa and Latin America. We are afraid of people of different races and ethnicities. Yet all through the Bible we are told not to be afraid. We put our trust in God and our trust in others.

The Kingdom of God is different from the Kingdoms of this World. No political system is the Kingdom of God. All governments, though they may vary in their practice of justice and peace, are part of the normalcy of civilization. They are part of the domination system. But the Kingdom of God is a different kind of Kingdom. Paul describes that in Galatians 3:27-28: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." As the baptized, we are called to collaborate with God in bringing about God's Kingdom. We begin by offering a cup of cold water to all who are thirsty.

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