

Year C, Lent 2

February 21st, 2016

Thomas L. Truby

Luke 13:31-35, Philippians 3:17-4:1

Sorting Out the Week

Paul wrote “I have told you many times and now say with deep sadness, many people live as enemies of the cross. Their lives end with destruction.” What did he mean?

Luke’s gospel says “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn’t want that. Look your house is abandoned.” Are we a nation that refuses to be gathered? Does our house increasingly feel abandoned to our own dysfunction? Many, including me, think that.

On Wednesday Aaron (our son) and I went to see Michael Moore’s new documentary, Where to Invade Next. It’s an exploration of some ideas we could take from other countries and bring to our own that might give us a new lease on life. It made quite an impression on Aaron and me. In my view it is neither left nor right but instead calls us back to what we have lost as a nation. In both screenings people spontaneously clapped when it was over.

Somehow these three avenues of thought; one from Paul, one from the gospel, and one from contemporary culture, have gotten scrambled in my head and I am hoping to sort them with you this morning.

We start with Paul who said many people live as enemies of the cross. Let me explain how I see the cross. I believe the cross exposes who humans are and what humans do. We see what humans do and have always done in watching what the humans of Jesus’ time did to him.

This means the cross did not legitimate the shedding of blood as a necessary sacrifice to God appeasing God’s presumed need for justice. Instead the cross exposed the scapegoating mechanism as the chief and most destructive component of human anthropology. The cross is not about Jesus sacrificing himself to God’s wrath to save us from it! That is a total misread of the cross and reduces the God of Jesus to a tyrant worse than any in history.

To live as an enemy of the cross is to refuse to acknowledge the truth the cross reveals about humans. It is to hide from that truth, cover it up, obscure it, or deny it. Here is an example of not hiding the truth and therefore living as a friend of the cross. Michael Moore has a segment on Germany where the children in a class in school openly acknowledge what Germany did to the Jews. Robert Koehler, reflecting on Moore’s movie writes:

In Germany, Moore visits an elementary-school classroom in which the students have been asked to bring an item precious to them—something they'd take with them if they were being forced to leave their homes forever. Each child places his or her keepsake in a suitcase, which symbolizes the suitcase of a Holocaust victim. The teacher closes the suitcase.

The expressions on the children's faces show the audience the depth and seriousness with which they took this. Later, in another vignette, a teenager of Middle Eastern descent who is now a citizen of Germany publicly owns German history as part of his history and commits to not letting it happen again. This amounts to a national confession of sin.

Contrast this with our history of racism and with the genocide of our Native American population. This is what the cross is meant to expose. It shows us that what the people of Jesus' day did to Jesus we did and do to African Americans and Native Americans in our country but we don't confess it. We hide it instead and argue about it.

Did any of you watch the story of the Black Panthers this week on PBS? Our culture "other-ized" the Black Panther movement and then destroyed them as though they were our enemies even though they were us. We could have listened to them and let them teach us about what it's like to be black in America. Having seen what the majority culture does through their eyes we could then make moves to change our collective behavior and attitudes. But we chose not to listen, assumed they were a dangerous enemy and covertly attacked them. We have never acknowledged this to ourselves and so the story was aired on PBS. This is an example of what festers within our corporate body where we continue to act in ways that are racist and seldom acknowledge it. It makes us enemies of the cross.

If we deny what the cross wants us to see, we become its enemy and that sets us up for destruction, not from God but from internal division and strife. We become rigid as a nation, lose touch with how all humans are alike and this hardens into these violent struggles that destroy us body and spirit.

So to deny what happened to the American Indians is to live as an enemy of the cross. To deny that our nation became wealthy by exploiting the work of enslaved humans is to live as an enemy of the cross. To deny how we have systematically continued to subdue black men through the new Jim Crow practice of disproportionately making them felons is to deny the cross.

Aaron and I both wept as images of prison brutality and humiliation of black men, and other scenes from our history with blacks too horrible to talk about here, flashed across the screen. We knew we were seeing the truth—the truth of the cross and so the tears flowed down our cheeks. Paul says "with deep sadness, many people live as enemies of the cross."

Again, the cross is not about Jesus sacrificing himself to God's wrath to save us from it! To believe that makes us enemies of the cross. There is another way and it's what we have been talking about with growing clarity here for the last ten years. There is much more to say but I want to move on.

Jesus said "Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing. But you didn't want that. Look your house is abandoned." You have gotten what you wanted. I wanted to gather you so that you would be safe but you were not willing. I wanted to save you from your alienating, divisive and violent ways, but you wouldn't allow it.

The old way of gathering is the sacrificial way. It attempts to create social unity by expelling those we think are bad or lesser; like black men or Native Americans or even the rest of us when we are sick and in need.

Jesus, God's Son, breaks the power of this old way by becoming the excluded one. Now if we follow Jesus we gather around those who are excluded because that is where Jesus is. He occupies the place of the excluded with his own body as a way of showing us what we do and where he is. He is the victim. And then he forgives us. James Alison says he is the forgiving victim. His forgiveness opens a new way; he is the new glue for community centered in inclusion, forgiveness and mercy. Now we gather to confess our sin, receive his grace and go out to live in forgiveness while serving those who are being excluded. I wonder if it is Germany's confession of her own sin that has allowed her to take in so many Muslim refugees.

We go back to the biblical text. All along Jesus has been in charge and charging forward toward Jerusalem. Herod the fox has been outfoxed. When Jesus is told that he should leave Galilee because Herod wants to kill him he replies "Go, tell that fox, 'Look, I'm throwing out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will complete my work.'"

Lent is a time of moving toward that third day completion. It won't happen in Galilee. It will happen in Jerusalem. The time and the place have already been established. Jesus chooses to die so as to get through to us. It's an act of love for us all. In this sense, he does sacrifice himself but it's not to God or to God's need for justice. It is to us and to our violence. It's his revelation of God's love.

His last line in today's reading is "I tell you, you won't see me until the time comes when you say, *Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord's name.*" We will see Jesus when we get so tired of scattering and the threat of scattering, of contention and strife, of self-promotion and lies that we finally say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." He will give us relief. In that turning we see him and find peace. Amen.