



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Perverting The Nation With Non Violence

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
March 28, 2010 - Palm Sunday

The name of the Gospel Drama we just witnessed is called, "The Return." Written by our own John Ahart with assistance from the actors, it returns us on this Palm Sunday to the most violent and traumatic story in our religious tradition. On this Palm Sunday we have returned to contemplate the Prince of Peace receiving the violence and trauma of religious and political force at its worst. One of the effects of the Cross is to remind us that religion and politics can be transformed from being violent and traumatizing and become what religion and politics were created by God to be – instruments of nonviolence and justice.

In order for that transformation to take place – turning religion and politics into instruments of nonviolence and justice – you and I must do our part. Play our roles. Our work – our essential, crucial interior work – is to let this person, Jesus, in all his awareness of the overwhelming power of God's love and his awareness of the truth about every human being – that each of us is beloved and created for goodness – to let this Jesus and his awareness become our awareness.

Thich Nhat Hahn, speaking about Jesus once, said "The Buddha and I are inseparable. When the Buddha breathes in me the quality of the breathing is very good and the quality of the Buddha's sitting is very good. Jesus is the same. You can have Buddha or Jesus in your body 24 hours a day," in every moment, transforming memories of trauma and violence into justice and nonviolence. If you can have Jesus inside you, your own heart can turn from being a heart of trauma and violence into a heart of compassion, nonviolence, and justice.

Dr. Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, was our guest last Sunday and Monday. She gave me a new understanding of how Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Thursday night when we will reenact the institution of the Lord's Supper and foot washing, Good Friday, and then Easter next Sunday – how all these central liturgies of our faith can transform us and heal us and empower us to be people of nonviolence and justice.

After a 10 year period of undergoing life-threatening traumas in her own life and in the lives of others, Serene discovered she that her old faith no longer worked. She says that she discovered that she had become "faithless." How many of us have been there?

So starting where she was, not being in denial, not trying to have a life different than the one she actually had, she reworked her entire faith in terms of her own experiences as well as the psychiatric literature on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

She became aware that trauma renders the one traumatized as having one's capacities of knowing and making meaning disabled and even, in some instances, shut down. Into this vexing spiritual, mental, and emotional incapacitation comes Grace, unmerited unexpected Love. The therapeutic understanding is that a power different from the traumatizing power can come to and register itself at the point of our deepest need. If this healing power (in the form of a therapist or a healthy mentor) stays there long enough, lovingly enough, and healingly enough, trust begins to be reconstituted so that the power of Grace can begin to steer the traumatized person or culture to a new path – a path of freedom, love, inclusion, and joy. Without this process of redirection, those who are traumatized instead reenact the old cycle of trauma and violence over and over and over so that the trauma is deepened and habitualized rather than healed. That habit of reenacting our earlier traumas in our interpersonal and institutional transactions – keeping the spiral of trauma going against others and within ourselves – helps me understand a great deal about the vitriol we are experiencing in our country in the wake of the passage of the health care reform bill.

How much of the spitting and name calling and violence against health care reform leaders is a reenactment of old civil wars within ourselves and within our culture? At the same time we must unequivocally reject the spitting and unmentionable name-calling, people on the extreme left and the extreme right in our country have a responsibility to ask to what extent is this a reenactment of old traumas going back before Vietnam and even before the Civil Rights movement to the Civil War. How different are today's Tea Party rallies and some rallies on the left different from dressing up in Civil War uniforms and reenacting old battles of decades ago? How frequently do partners and spouses and others reenact old traumas just to keep life familiar but not free?

It is here where I think Holy Week can reach and heal us. Jesus's love and work during Holy Week was his strategy for putting an end to the abuse of reenacting traumas. In the violence and trauma of the cross at which we gaze this week, God entered our human trauma and violence and showed the world what it was like for a loving, whole, healing instrument of Grace to enter our trauma at its core and then lead us out of an old but ever-wounding and abusing narrative of violence and into a New Order of compassion, inclusion, and freedom, transforming you and me to be instruments of healing and grace, peace and justice – in our time.

William Sloane Coffin says that this morning the sermons of many pulpiteers will mislead thousands of Christians into thinking that this cross needs to be spiritualized alone without pointing up that it was bad politics and bad religion that killed Jesus. What Jesus brought in the place of abusive traumatizing religion and politics was what Coffin calls "the politics of eternity." Coffin says there are three hallmarks of the politics of eternity on which we need to base our real word politics:

1. Nonviolence
2. Universality
3. Self-knowledge

(William Sloane Coffin, "The Politics of Eternity," *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin; The Riverside Years*, Volume 1, p. 316)

Jesus said this morning as he entered Jerusalem, “How I wish today that all of you would understand the way to peace. But peace is hidden from your eyes.” (Lk 19: 42) Jesus was invoking the prophets who went before him. “The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them can know peace. “ (Isaiah 59:8)

Fr. Greg Boyle is the founding priest of Homeboys Industries – a center where people who have left gang life can learn a trade, have their tattoos removed, and receive mentoring about living a life outside a system, a system of gangs that gives people an identity based on exclusion and violence. He says that the difference in gangs and true church is that gangs make inclusion and affection conditional on exclusion and violence. Some churches act like gangs instead of churches. But true church makes inclusion and affection conditional on absolutely nothing. God dwells in you unconditionally.

In his new book, *Tatoos on the Heart; the Power of Boundless Compassion*, Father Greg (he’ll be here in early June to speak to us) tells the story of a kid named Betito, a precocious, funny, bold 12-year old from Aliso Village in East L.A. Father Greg called him one of the kids who would drop by Dolores Mission church within the Hollenbeck Police Division. “They’d just sit on the couch in the waiting area or play video games on the computers. They were dry emaciated sponges hoping to catch just one drop of adult attention. All of the staff got into the habit of asking each kid, daily, ‘So, what did you learn today that you never knew before?’ Betito was one of those special kids who always had something to say that he had learned in school. “Today I learned about da buffalo.” Today I learned about Fractions.” He always wanted to converse only in English to improve his English since Spanish was the only language spoken in his home. He always wanted to be with adults to compensate for the absence of adult supervision and affection in his life. One Sunday evening Betito was playing with his cousin, a van pulled into his housing project, opened fire and Betito was killed – age twelve.

Father Greg writes in his book about his own learning that being in the world the way Jesus was in the world is the only way that works. Being in the world the way Jesus was in the world is the only way that works anywhere but especially with kids who are trying to become free of a system based on exclusion and violence. Father Greg’s thesis is that Jesus’s goal was “To be in the world who God is.” And that is to exercise a compassion that is based in loving others “no matter what,” and that that “no matter what-ism” must be as vast as God is and must always be about being a part of a process where the ones on the outside have been let inside.

He writes, “If we long to be in the world who God is in the world, then, somehow our compassion has to find its way to spaciousness, to vastness. When the guys in the van who killed Betito were caught and I found out that I knew and loved them, it was excruciating not to be able to hate them. They were sheep without a shepherd. And they were no less the real deal [than Betito]. It’s just that they lack someone to reveal the truth to them. The truth about how beloved they were. They had evaded healing and the task of returning to themselves and that traumatic cycle got more hardened and difficult the older they became. But then I had to ask myself are they any less worthy of compassion than Betito? I will admit that the degree of difficulty here is exceedingly high. Kids I love killing kids I love. There is nothing neat in carving space for both

in our compassion. There is nothing neat about Jesus hanging on the cross carving space for everyone in God's compassion – look at every war, look at every squabble and God is saying “Kids I love killing kids I love.”

Father Greg continues, “Jesus says if you love those who love you, big wow. Jesus doesn't cease to love those who love us when he nudges us to love our enemies. Nor does Jesus think the harder thing is the better thing. He knows it's just the harder thing. But to love the enemy and to find some spaciousness for the victimizer, as well as the victim, resembles more the expansive compassion of God. That's why you do it because you and I are here to be in the world who God is in the world and there is nothing neat in carving space for everyone in our compassion.” (Boyle, Gregory, *Tattoos of the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, p. 63-67)

The third part of the politics of eternity is self-knowledge. Thomas Merton wrote, “If I can unite *in myself* all the differences [in religions and science and the people who have animosity toward one another, then] from that secret and unspoken unity in myself I can eventually produce a visible and manifest unity of all people. If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division on the other or absorbing one division into the other. But if we do that, the union is not of Christ.” (Merton, Thomas, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* p. 12. Also in *Seeds*, pp. 137)

It is not Godly, it is partisan and doomed to further conflict reenactment of the trauma, year end and year out for eternity. “We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in God.” There is nothing neat in that. (Merton, Thomas, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* p. 12. Also in *Seeds*, pp. 137)

“The first job of every person,” Merton says, “is to understand the psychological forces at work in ourselves and in society,” (Merton, Thomas, “The Root of War,” *Catholic Worker*, # 28, October, 1961 p. 1. Also in *Seeds*, p. 142) and Serene Jones says that involves the psychological forces of trauma in you and in society.

Jesus never lost his love for the perpetrators and perpetuators of evil, because he had had a blessed Lent, those forty days in the desert. And he showed us how someone at the same time never loses ones love for the perpetrators and the perpetuators of evil nor loses one's anger at all the perpetrators of evil do. (William Sloane Coffin, “Palm Sunday: God's Pageant,” *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin; The Riverside Years*, Volume 2, p. 528) Loving one's enemies is not about giving up one's anger, it is about giving up one's violence and reenactment of trauma.

Jesus was called a perverter of the nation because Jesus insisted on living by non violence, universality, and self-knowledge. They said he stirred up the people every time he taught them. Yes, he stirred them up just like you and I stir up someone else when we authentically say to them, not only in our words but in our actions, God dwells in you and believe and perform that belief that God dwells in you – a even in our adversaries and our enemies.

Jesus never lost his love for the perpetrators and the perpetuators of evil, nor did he ever lose his anger at all they did. It's a messy life, you and I are called to live – a life of courage, a

life of vision, a life of audacity, a life of speaking truth to power and a life of loving and praying for our enemies and our adversaries. But when we do that we will be instruments of God's peace. Rather than inflict suffering we will know something of Jesus' choosing to take suffering upon himself not because it is intrinsically good to suffer, but because it is better to suffer a little bit more myself so that I can interrupt somebody else's suffering.

This morning and this week we are called to return – to return to the cross where there is nothing neat in carving space for everybody in our compassion – but carving space for everyone in our hearts and in the world for our compassion is the only thing that works. Because non violence, universal belovedness and self-knowledge is the way to be in the world, the way God is in the world.

We are called to be who God is in the world. May in our gazing upon the cross this day and this Holy Week, this Thursday night and Friday, may we know in ourselves and then be instruments in the world, of how powerfully healing it is for a person to come into the place of our deepest need and the place where we have been traumatized so deeply and begin to lead us away from reenacting that trauma upon ourselves and upon others and begin to be an instrument of truly turning the human race into the human family.

Amen.