

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“The Way of the Cross”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

5th Sunday in Lent (Year B)

March 18, 2018

John 12:20-33

(The direction of this sermon has been significantly shaped and guided by a commentary written by Charles L. Campbell, found in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2. I am grateful for Campbell’s wisdom and insight, and most of all for his passion for the Gospel.)

Will Willimon, of Duke Divinity School, tells the story of a situation that arose at a little church he once served.

The latest ruckus to hit the house of God here at 435 Summit Drive [he writes] was precipitated (as was the previous one) by the pastor. All I did was to suggest to an amateur woodcarver in the congregation that it would be nice if he turned his talents toward the carving of a processional cross for our church. I had in mind something simple, modern and clean, something congruent with [our church’s] minimalist architecture, something light enough for a white-robed adolescent to carry on Sundays. What we got on the first Sunday of Lent was a dramatic sort of cross, heavy, complete, with a realistic, bleeding corpus, a hanging, crucified Christ, blood and everything.

Some managed to like it because a nice person had made it. Some liked it because they appreciated the intricate carving. But many were upset because it was “more Catholic than Methodist,” “gory and depressing,” or didn’t “go with our colors.”

What is a modern, progressive, slightly liberal, well-budgeted Methodist church to do with a bloody cross these days?¹

What indeed!

You see, most Protestant Christians know that there will be no crucifix in their own sanctuaries. No body of Jesus will be found adorning crosses on communion tables or necklaces or in any other place. Why? Because we worship a Risen Christ. Good Friday is not the end of the story. Easter is just around the bend and we worship and pray to a risen Lord, not a dead, defeated one. This is a part of our theology of the cross. Jesus is risen! The cross is empty. The grave is empty. Jesus is alive.

But we Protestants also need to acknowledge the underlying danger to our theology of the empty cross. The danger is that we might just forget what happened in the days leading up to Easter, that we might just be tempted to gloss over all that pain and suffering and beating and blood and violence and betrayal and – well – all that

¹ William Willimon, “Drawing All to Himself (John 12:32).” This article appeared in the *Christian Century* March 24, 1982, p. 326. Found by this preacher on www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1295

yuckiness – because, if we are honest, we don't like the way it makes us feel. Why dwell on the darkness of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday when we know good and well that Easter is coming? Let's just skip that painful middle part and get on to the happy ending already. Surely no one would blame us for that, would they?

Maybe this is why Roman Catholics are all in worship during Holy Week - all the days including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday - while Protestant churches have plenty of extra seats open and are only packed out on Easter Sunday.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why. We want good news. Not bad news. Not pain and suffering. We have enough of that in our own lives, in our own country, on our own world-news-tonight television broadcasts. No. We can only take so much. So we take the empty cross. Not the gory, defeated version of Jesus hanging on it. We want to know we are saved, that death is defeated. We are quite fine without the suffering part.

But then we find ourselves face to face with John's gospel. And we have to rethink the whole crucifixion thing all over again.

In today's text, Jesus has already entered triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey, an event we will celebrate next week on Palm/Passion Sunday. He has already raised Lazarus from the dead. Mary has already anointed him with oil, preparing him in

advance for his burial. The chief priests have already been plotting to kill him. He's a controversial public figure loved by some and hated by others. It's no wonder the Greeks at the beginning of our passage today want to see him. They approach Philip, a guy with a Greek name, and ask if they can see him, like someone would ask a guard at the backstage door if they could get in to see the superstar in his dressing room.

So Philip tells Andrew and they go together to Jesus and somehow they all forget about the Greeks waiting patiently at the backstage door and Jesus starts to teach his disciples as much as he can about what is about to happen.

"OK guys. Here's the thing. I'm about to be glorified. Now is the time." And he goes on, trying to get them to understand through a seed metaphor that he will die but life will come out of death, trying to get them to understand that they must hate their life in this world in order to keep it. And that they must follow Jesus wherever he goes.

Where is he going? Jesus knows that he is going to the cross. Jesus knows that he is going to his death. In John's gospel, Jesus goes to the cross not for the forgiveness of individual sins, but for the judgment of the world.

Theologian Walter Wink reminds us that for John, the *world* (which in the Greek is *kosmos*) does not refer to the *created* world; rather John uses this word to refer to the "fallen realm that exists in estrangement from God and is organized in opposition to

God's purposes.² The world to which John refers is the one, writes Chuck Campbell, "embodied in structures and institutions, that aggressively shapes human life and seeks to hold human beings captive to its ways."³

You know that world, don't you? Wink renames it "The System." This world preaches a gospel of power, money, prestige, recognition, authority. As a part of the System, we are taught to consume, consume, consume – to eat more, to drink more, to buy more, to buy more often, to buy bigger – and we are taught to justify our over-consumption in so many ways it makes our heads spin. How many of us, asks Campbell, "consume and consume, even though we know such consumption is not giving us life, and we know it is killing others in sweatshops through the System?"⁴

In the world, in the System, we are taught that might makes right, that bigger is better, that we must push or be pushed. We are shown the ladder to success and told not to think too much about the ones we have to step on to get to the top. The System is made up of hierarchies that make the rules that keep the winners on top, the powerful in power. This leads to "structures and institutions that perpetuate racism, sexism, and heterosexism."⁵

² Found in reflection by Charles Campbell in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p.141. He is drawing on Walter Wink's work in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 13-31, 51-59, so I elected to cite Wink rather than Campbell.

³ Charles Campbell, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p.141.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Campbell, 143.

And so the recent news about white supremacists putting up hate banners on highway overpasses in 21 different states should not be surprising.⁶ Nor should the fact that National Geographic coverage has reflected a history of racism, or that for decades the New York Times published only obituaries of white males. Nor should we be surprised when we still have to fight for healthcare for all, or that our teenagers have to walk out of their schools to fight to place limits on guns. These things should not be surprising if we understand the System and how it works. The System is in place to keep power in the hands of the powerful and anything that threatens that must be stopped.

Which is why the chief priests had to stop Jesus – had to kill Jesus.

This brings me to another aspect of the System that we see far too often these days – violence. Walter Wink calls the “myth of redemptive violence” the primary myth of the System. This myth perpetuates the belief that “the way to bring order out of chaos is through violently defeating ‘the other.’”⁷

The way to bring order out of chaos is through violently defeating the other.

Like the way a single gunman ordered his own chaos by violently murdering 17 innocents at Marjory Douglas Stoneman High School in Parkland, Florida.

Like the way Hema herders and Lendu farmers in the Ituri province of the Congo have sought order to their chaos by burning villages and killing one another.

⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/15/us/adl-white-supremacist-banners/index.html>

⁷ Campbell, 143.

Like the way one takes the life of another in anger, rage, fear, or vengeance.

The myth that good can come out of violence, that the world will be better if some deservedly die, or if some are righteously punished, is the myth that guides many to redemptive violence every day. It is the same myth that is used by Popeye the Sailor man when he swallows his spinach in order to beat Bluto to a pulp and give him his just due. It is also the myth that guides the thinking behind the death penalty. It is the myth that guides acts of war. It is the guiding myth of the System. It is the guiding myth of the world Jesus has come to defeat through his own death on the cross.

Campbell again:

Throughout his journey to the cross, Jesus enacts his freedom from this myth, refusing to respond in the System's own violent terms. Indeed, in his trial before Pilate, Jesus suggests that violence, which he rejects, is central to the System. In response to Pilate's questioning, Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not from [this System]. If my kingdom were from [this System], my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). Jesus' rejection of violence is precisely what distinguishes his way from the way of the System.

On the cross Jesus publicly and dramatically judges the System by exposing it for what it is – not the divine regent of the world, but an opponent of God's

purposes; not the way of life, but the way of death. And by exposing the System in this way, Jesus “casts out” its driving spirit; for once we have seen the System for what it is, we begin to be set free from its captivating ways. We are set free to die to a life shaped by the System, in order to live fully and freely in the way of Jesus (12:25-26).⁸

Which brings us back to that humble cross built by a hardworking craftsman in Willimon’s Methodist congregation – a cross which bore a realistic, bloody, and crucified Christ – a cross which was brought forward by a groaning crucifer once a week and placed in plain view for all to see what the System thought was justice, what the System thought was redemption, what the System thought was life. And maybe we all need to look at the cross that way once in a while, see the violent ugliness of the System, which runs counter to everything Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of God, and in so seeing, in so understanding, choose to die to the System and live our lives to serve and follow Jesus – into the Kingdom of life, and of love, and of true and lasting redemption. When we die to the System, we live for the Kingdom of God in Christ. May it always be so.

Amen.

© 2018: Mindy Douglas

⁸ Ibid, 145.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

© FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 2018. FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.