Good Friday

April 18, 2025

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

As I contemplate on this most somber day, I ask the questions:

Why did Jesus have to die and what caused his death? Jesus would always be against the lies and deceit of our world. He would always stand up to injustice and evil. He would always come up against the evil powers of our world. But before we start putting ourselves in neat categories of us and them, we need to realize that we are all capable of evil. We can all get caught up in new ways of thinking that appear as truths to us and cause us to react out of fear and anxiety.

A fear years ago I preached on this story from the Christian Century, April 2023 by Melissa Earley, a First United Methodist pastor. The article is a reflection on the Good Friday gospel in John. She writes:

“The Washington Post reported that Jake Peart was among the nearly 1,000-person mob that stormed the capitol on January 6, 2021. At his sentencing hearing he told the judge that he was driven by a state of desperation, a conviction that the presidential election had been stolen and the country he loved was falling apart. He said, ‘I felt like we were at battle, standing up for our country’. Jake Peart was repentant.

Peart is more than a member of a mob. He is also a person. He is a 47-year-old real estate agent, a husband and father of five. In 2013 Andrea Milholm was driving drunk and struck Peart’s sisters Krista and Kelsey as they walked along a Denver street. Krista was killed and Kelsey was seriously injured. Milholm was sentenced to five years in prison. While she was in prison, Jake Peart wrote her monthly letters of encouragement and forgiveness. After a year of incarceration, she was eligible for transfer to a halfway house. Peart wrote the judge a letter in favor of her early release. Peart said, ‘I want what will be most beneficial to Andrea’. Peart is a good person. But being good isn’t enough. It isn’t protection from being led astray by lies. Being good does not inoculate us from evil. ...” Now I am sure we have different reactions to this story and we could debate if what he did was a crime but hear me out.

Pastor Melissa goes on to say that evil is what we are up against. Evil uses people’s anxieties, fears, and prejudices to twist good intentions into cruel deeds. What separates those who commit heinous crimes from others? Their moral compass gets redirected. The natural inclination to protect their own gets warped by lies. They come to believe that their acts of horror are necessary, justified, and even right. When a perpetrator of the Holocaust was asked how did you think it was right to kill the Jews? The person responded, ‘It’s not that I thought it was right to kill them, but it was wrong not to kill them’. A lie is the most powerful tool of evil. It turns good people into weapons of hate. Once we believe a lie, we will do all that we can to defend what we have come to believe is true even if it goes against our religious values. Jake Peart believed what he did at the time was right. He was sentenced to 3 years of probation, served a year, and was pardoned.

Evil has been around since the beginning of time. It confuses the truth so that our decisions on how to act get confused. Evil is a part of the Good Friday story. It slithers through the scenes, hissing lies and breathing hate. Evil is at work in the Roman occupation, creating the very context in which Jesus’s life and ministry cause anxiety for some religious leaders. Caiaphas did not take on his position of authority in order to cut down an innocent man. His aim was to protect the faith and to maintain an institution. But notice that Jesus did not hurt people when he criticized Rome or the temple authorities. He used words and influenced people to open their eyes and to do the right thing.

Humankind has had a long history of perpetuating lies about others who are different or others who we fear will threaten our way of life. This happened in the United stated when those of African descent were thought to be less than human. In the 1800’s doctors testified that people of African descent had smaller brains and different DNA. They were not pure Homo Sapiens. In the 1900’s Hitler perpetuated the same sort of lies against the Jews and others who were not of Arian descent.

In 2025, we live in a society that is split. We pray and hope that we will be more kind and loving to those with differing views than us. The problem is each side believes they know the truth. In 2023, Pastor Melissa ends her reflection with: “What is truth? Often, we get the answer to this important question wrong”.

The Romans and Jewish authorities thought they knew the truth about Jesus. They thought that he was a rebel rouser. A revolutionary. A person who claimed to be God. A false messiah. Yet the other truth is that Jesus was who he claimed to be; God, the messiah and yes a revolutionary who would overturn what people in the First Century and beyond thought that they knew about God. Jesus is our truth. When we need guidance on choices that we make, we look there. Jesus as God was pure goodness and love. He would never accept the lies and violence perpetuated by evil, hate, greed, and selfishness. He came up against our human world with lies and the false truths that we tell ourselves to lessen our fears. So, on this Friday, Good Friday Jesus died and he looked defeated but evil never wins. Stay tuned for the end of the story-Easter.