

Good Friday – April 7, 2021
The Passion According to Matthew

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We're upending our tradition here at Grace this year by not having a Tenebrae Service, where we finish the service by being immersed in gradual darkness as the passion account is read. Instead we are finishing tonight with Heinrich Schütz's Seven Words of Christ from the Cross. As Chet wrote in his notes at the end of your bulletin, those seven words are not found in a single Gospel account, but are from all four Gospels. And each of the Gospels has unique sayings of Jesus not found in the others. One reason for this is each of the Gospels is written for a different community of early Christians, each facing its own set of circumstances and realities that the Gospel writers want to address. This can be a troubling realization if you tend to think of the Gospel accounts as journalistic or historical blow-by-blow accounts of the events as they transpired, written down by eyewitnesses. That, however, is not the nature of these documents. John is explicit about at the end of his account, where he wrote that the purpose of what he relates is so that his audience will come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. That makes his account more like a sermon than a newspaper story, although certainly not very much like the sermons I preach. But despite our differences, John and I have the same goal in mind.

The other Gospels share this same goal as well, even if they are less explicit about it. The ultimate point of all of them is not to present interesting facts about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for the historical record, but to help their audiences to recognize Jesus as the one sent by God to save the world from sin, death, and evil. I want to mostly let our passion reading stand for itself tonight. But I do want to focus in on one element of the story that has been historically misunderstood and misused so that we both appreciate what Matthew is actually doing here and avoid continuing the false narrative that has done so much damage throughout history. The verse in question is verse 25 of chapter 27: "Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" A plain reading of that verse has led many Christians to believe that it is the Jewish people who are responsible for the death of Jesus, and here is the smoking gun, as it were. Here they are admitting it, and passing their guilt along to their descendants. This understanding persists into our own time. I attended a webinar last week, that I mentioned in my letter to Rabbi Cook on Saturday. The rabbi who led the webinar told of a time when he was a child in the 1950s when one of his friends, a Christian, told him that he couldn't play with him anymore because "he killed Christ." So let me be clear about this. This verse, and the verses around it, do not intend to demonize the Jewish people. Let's remember once again that Jesus and original disciples were all Jewish. And the audience that Matthew was writing to half a century after Jesus resurrection was an audience of Jewish Christians. That is why Matthew quotes the Old Testament more than any of the other Gospel writers. That can be hard to catch in this verse because Matthew isn't directly quoting Scripture the way he does earlier in the chapter in that quote from Jeremiah. But he is clearly alluding to a scriptural event that his audience would have caught immediately, namely Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, which you may know as one of the highest of the Jewish holy days. I think that all of the first three Gospels are making this connection, but Matthew is the most obvious about it.

You may have noticed in the reading that there are actually two Jesuses here, Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Barabbas. One of them gets released, and the other gets killed. Now where have we run into that sort of thing before? "Doesn't ring a bell," we're likely to say, because we don't celebrate the Day of Atonement, and because we don't tend to read Leviticus very much either. But that's what's happening in Leviticus 16. Aaron the priest is instructed to take two

young goats. One of them is to be sacrificed and the other he is to pray over, symbolically attach the people's sins to it, and then have it taken out into the wilderness and let go. The blood of the sacrificed goat is then used to cleanse the tabernacle and the altar of the people's uncleanness. Weird stuff. Very foreign to us and to our culture. But to Matthew's original audience, this would have been very meaningful, because for them this historically is how atonement is made with God and their sins forgiven.

So the people here are confessing their sin. Because that's just what you do on the Day of Atonement. You admit your sin. But crowd didn't know that that's what they were doing. Matthew is being ironic here. He is hinting that they are actually asking to be forgiven. Because that, of course, is the meaning of Jesus' death. Blood was life in the Jewish understanding of things. (That's in the next chapter of Leviticus.) That's why they're not allowed to consume blood, and why animals have to be drained of their blood in a particular way to make food Kosher, fit to be eaten. That's also why blood "cleansed" the tabernacle and the altar, though if you had witnessed it yourself you would have thought of it as quite the mess. So in asking for Jesus' blood to be upon them, they are unwittingly asking to be cleansed by Jesus' life, just as Pilate, who thought he was making a good joke by posting "This is Jesus, King of the Jews," was unwittingly making a true declaration, that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, something backed up by his own soldiers at Jesus' death, who acclaimed him as God's son.

That's enough now for this part of the Passion narrative. I hope what I have said has helped illuminate this troubling passage. And you should know that I didn't make this up. There is a long history of this understanding going back the early church, though it has not been appreciated much in the modern church before 40 years ago or so. The bottom line is that it is unfaithful to the biblical texts, to Jesus' teachings, and to the fundamental affirmations of Christian theology to blame the Jewish people for Jesus' death. And just in case that hasn't quite sunk in just yet, I invite you to pay close attention to the hymn we will now sing. Who is responsible? We are. You and I. Because of the sin we share with all of humankind. We don't get to point fingers, except at ourselves, and then at the cross, which the locus of our forgiveness, the source of our hope, and the way to life that really is life.