

Crucified for Us

Palm Sunday 2017

1st UMC Sunnyvale P D. Schlager

John 18:1-19:42:

Hebrews 10:16-25

I can't get out of my mind an illustration

which M. Scott Peck used in his book on evil, *People of the Lie*.

A 15-year-old boy is hospitalized for depression.

Bobby's older brother, Stuart, had committed suicide
with a .22 caliber rifle some months earlier.

At first Bobby did not seem to suffer any adverse consequences.

But then his grades deteriorated.

Finally, he stole a car.

When Peck, the psychiatrist, was asked to meet with Bobby,

as a conversation starter, Peck asked Bobby

what he had received as a Christmas gift.

Bobby was non-responsive.

Peck pressed harder, *asking what Bobby received.*

At last Bobby said

he had received a gun!

Here is Peck's account:

"A gun?" I repeated stupidly.

"Yes."

I asked slowly

"What kind of gun?" .

"A twenty-two."

"A twenty-two pistol?"

"No, a twenty-two rifle."

There was a long moment of silence.

I felt as if I had lost my bearings.

I wanted to stop. I wanted to go home.

Finally I pushed myself to say what had to be said.

"I understand that it was with a .22 rifle that your brother killed himself."

"Yes."

Bobby had not asked for such a gift.

In fact, he had asked for a tennis racket.

Peck hesitantly continued the conversation.

"How did you feel, getting the same kind of gun that your brother had
Bobby replied

"It wasn't the same kind of gun," .

I began to feel better. Maybe I was just confused.

"I'm sorry, I thought they were the same kind of gun."
Bobby replied

"It wasn't the same kind of gun," "It was the gun."

Bobby's parents had taken Stuart's suicide weapon
and given it to their other son for Christmas.

The next day Peck met with these parents
and found them to be hardworking people
and faithful churchgoers: "quiet, orderly, solid.

When Peck brought up giving a gun as a Christmas present.

The parents were defensive

The father accused Peck
of being a fanatical antigun advocate.

The father explained that
" a gun is a good present for a boy his age."

Peck continued to press the question and the father answered,
"We couldn't afford to get him a new gun.

I don't know why you're picking on us.

We gave him the best present we could."

For Peck, this conversation remained vividly in his memory as an example of
the insidious, and ordinary quality of our worst evil.

These parents had given their son the gun
as an invitation to suicide.

How can this be?

How can we explain the evil that infects us?

What does God say about this kind of evil?

What response can we give?

I recently saw again the Movie "Truce"

It is about an Italian Jew named Primo Levi

who was a prisoner at Auschwitz death camp
during the second world war.

The movie begins with the camp being liberated by the Russian Army.

And deals with his journey back to his home in Italy.

And his recovery of his humanity.

It is a powerful and moving film and I recommend it highly.

In one scene, he and another refugee are on a train
headed in the general direction of Italy.

And they begin to talk about

why out of all the millions killed were they spared?

The friend says to Primo

I believe God spared you so that you would write.

so that you would tell what happened to us.

Levi responds

Then God doesn't exist.

*How could God allow so many people to die
just to provide inspiration for a writer?*

"No God does not exist."

And others say when faced with such terrible evil

*God doesn't care, God is impotent
or God is ignorant or blind.*

Dostoevsky in his novel The Brothers Karamazou

takes another angle on the horror of evil and sin.

He has Ivan Karamazov tell a story of a poor serf child

who while he was playing, *hit his master's hunting dog with a stone.*

The master had the boy seized and the next morning
*he was hunted and torn to pieces by the master's hounds
before his mother's eyes.*

Ivan says

*(We are in Hell Aloysha.) I want to forgive.
I want to embrace. I don't want any more suffering
And if the sufferings of children go to make up
the sum of sufferings
which is necessary for the purchase of the truth,*

then I say beforehand

that the entire truth is not worth the price.

*I do not want a mother to embrace the torturer
who had her child torn to pieces by his dogs.*

She has no right to forgive him.....

And therefore I return my ticket of admission (to the human race).....

It is not God that I do not accept, Alyosha.

I merely most respectfully return him the ticket.

I accept God, understand that,

but I cannot accept the world that he has made."

The early church insisted on a different answer to evil.

"He died for us"

He was crucified, died, and was buried. For us.

There is much that we do not know about Jesus.

*The gospels are not very helpful
in reconstructing a full life of the historical Jesus.*

There are conflicts

regarding the date and place of birth.

We know nothing

of his early, formative years.

Various gospels

place him in various places in Judea.

Few external sources,

only Josephus, give us a record of him and his work.

There is only one fact of Jesus
that is undisputed, historically certain, without doubt.
He was crucified.

In his early thirties, after a brief career around Galilee,
the Romans arrested him, tried him,
then nailed him to a cross to die.
Jesus was crucified.

Yet it is a Christian claim,
not only that Jesus was crucified,
but that he was crucified for us.
Crucifixion itself is tragedy enough.
But crucified for me?

As Paul says,
"You might be willing to die for a good person,
but he shows his love for us in that, at the right time,
Jesus died for the ungodly" US (Rom 5:6).

There are all kinds of theologies of the cross
Existential theologies of the cross
Substitutionary theologies.
Vengeful God theologies
Ransom theologies.
None of them explain the paradox
how Jesus dying on the cross is good for us.

I don't think you can explain the cross with theology.
Jesus didn't come to explain theology to us.

He came to us
so that God could be in relationship with us.

And the cross
can only be spoken of in terms of a relationship.

Emily Dickinson, that wonderful poet
near the end of her life, she wrote in a letter:
*'When Jesus tells us about his Father,
we distrust him.
When he shows us his Home,
we turn away.
But when he confides to us that
he is "acquainted with Grief," we listen,
for that also is an Acquaintance of our own.'*

Ron Sider has written movingly about the cross
and its implications for us: He says,
*I know from personal experience
that the way to joy and happiness
is found in the biblical truth about
both God's holiness and God's mercy.
My wife and I have lived together
for thirty-five years of what Richard Foster rightly calls
a mixture of ecstasy and snoring.*

*Mostly it has been joy.
But there have also been times of struggle.
The most painful time came in our late thirties.
No, we did not commit adultery.
But we caused each other great pain.
Sadly, I must confess that there were times
when my anger at her blazed so furious
that I wanted to hurt her deeply.
Partly to wound her and partly to satisfy sinful desires,
I probably would have had an adulterous affair-but for one thing.
I knew it was sin. I knew a holy God hated adultery.
I knew I could not break my marriage vow
and still look freely into the loving eyes of my Lord.
God's righteous commands protected me
when my strength was weak.*

The biblical truth about God's holiness guarded my step
and kept me from inflicting awful pain
on the person I loved more than anyone else in the world.
That is not, however, to pretend
that I had not sinned against her.

We had inflicted great pain on each other.
Our marriage was in crisis.
There were days when I wondered if it would survive.
As I pondered the wounds
that she and I had inflicted on each other,
I gained a deeper understanding of the cross.

I realized we had only three choices.
We could pretend that our sins against each other
were not very important, -that they did not really matter very much.
But that would have been an absurd lie.
It hurt like hell.

Or, we could have shouted in anger:
"That's it. I'll never forgive you."
But that would have ended our relationship forever.

Both the first and second options
would have made genuine reconciliation impossible.

There was just one other possibility.
I had to say to her and she had to say to me:
"Your betrayal was awful. It hurts terribly.
But I love you. I love you so much
that I will take the evil you have done
into my heart and forgive you.
I can't say it was nothing.
But I don't want to live forever estranged and hostile.
So I will accept the wounds of your wickedness
and purify them with my love and forgiveness."

That's what **God** was doing at the cross.

Our sins are too awful for God to wink at them.

Yet, God's love is too strong for God to forget us.

So God embraces our sin,

absorbs the evil we have done to his divine heart,

and accepts the punishment we deserve-

all because he wants to walk with us again

face to face in openness and reconciliation.

The Christian faith has no real explanation to the evils of this world.

All we have is the cross,

a God who enters into our unspeakable evil

and speaks, ... no enacts, pure love.

That's the most amazing solution to the problem of evil

the world has ever seen.

All the Scriptures agree, whatever else there is to be said about Jesus,

he was crucified, one of the millions of Jewish martyrs.

He was crucified.

This day, this week, remember:

He was crucified by us, because of us, for us.For us.

Amen.

SDG