
The Worst Thing We Can Say

Luke 13:31-35

A sermon preached in Page Auditorium on February 21, 2016

by the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is one of the saddest stories in the gospels—right up there with him weeping over the death of his dear friend Lazarus, or rearing back when Judas leans toward him on the night of his arrest: “Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?” (Luke 22.48). There is such sorrow in these stories, such crushing disappointment at the way things have turned out--in spite of his higher vision for them, his life's labor on their behalf.

In the case of Lazarus, Jesus intervenes, bringing his friend back from death into life using powers we do not have. In the other two cases he is more like us, suffering things he cannot (or will not) change. He laments over a city that has killed people like him before and seems bent on doing it again. On the night of his arrest he watches the police push Judas aside, then stops his friends from trying to save him by force. “No more of this!” he says, when one of them pulls out a sword and cuts off a trooper's ear. The trooper's not the enemy; the sword's the enemy. Just in case anyone has missed the point, Jesus heals the man's ear. Then he holds out his hands for the cuffs, as it were, turning his face to the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.

This is not just a sad story; it's a scary story, at least for those who claim Jesus as their exemplar. If he's the one we're meant to emulate, then the implications are chilling. Open your wings to people who mean to kill you? Heal the hurt of a guy who has come to arrest you? Stop your friends from treating an armed posse like the enemy when that is clearly how they see *you*?

Maybe I've just watched too many *Star Wars* movies, or maybe I need to cut back on the news. It's almost never good. Who wants to hear about how *no one* was bitten by a pit bull today, or how the local school board is modeling bipartisanship at its best?

Things like that actually show up in the twice-weekly newspaper where I live. In the current issue, I learned that the newly re-opened Huddle House on Washington Street scored 100 on its first inspection by the Habersham County Health Department (tidings of great joy to the college students who do in fact huddle there) and that one of our local theaters just received a \$5000 Vibrant Communities Grant. In last week's issue I read about the Valentine's Day cards that showed up on the trays of senior citizens receiving Meals on Wheels in my county—little frilly things made out of red construction paper and white lace doilies by kids at the local elementary school who got the idea from a website called DoSomething.org/

It's not a perfect place by any means (I also like reading the arrest report and the phone log from the sheriff's office), but the newspaper is a fair reflection of a small town where people have a lot to be thankful for and treat each other

pretty well—at least if you overlook the letters to the editor on page 4. What a swamp of snark and innuendo! What a smelly pool of venomous enemy-thinking—especially during an election year.

“In light of the total incompetence of...”

“No one who cares for this great country could possibly vote for....”

“If so, then get ready to reap the whirlwind, because....”

Who are these people?

Every now and then I recognize a name, but 99% of these caustic letter writers are unknown to me, which means that they could be absolutely *anyone*—like the cop who directs traffic in front of the middle school every afternoon (he looks like such a nice guy!), or the school bus driver who waves at him when she pulls out with a full load of kids (she has the whole middle of the day free to write letters to the editor, after all). Maybe it’s my rural mail carrier (with nothing to do all day but listen to talk radio) or the stooped woman in front of me at the grocery store (who is buying so much junk that it has to have affected her brain).

I know I have to stop this, but it’s hard to do once I’ve succumbed to the *us-or-them, you’re-either-with-us-or-against-us, choose-this-day-whom-you-will-serve* kind of rhetoric that takes over during an election year. We must love it because we keep doing it, though no one I know has much confidence that anything is going to change anytime soon. It doesn’t seem to matter whether people are white or brown, purists or moderates, with Feel The Bern bumper stickers on their cars or Gun Owners for Trump (There Will be Hell Toupée)—the refrain I hear most often *from all of them* is that our government is broken and no one seems able to fix it--or, in modern paraphrase of today’s gospel, “Washington, Washington, the city that neuters its politicians and throws stones at those elected to it.”

I don’t think Jesus has a solution for Washington any more than he had a solution for Jerusalem, but I do think he has a word for those of us who might join him in lamenting what we have become.

Last week I read an interview in the *New York Review of Books*—a dialog, really, between the sitting president and one of his favorite novelists, Marilynne Robinson, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Gilead* and an essayist after John Calvin’s own heart. The president was in Des Moines for a political event, but decided to make time for something he almost never gets to do, which was to sit down with one of his favorite writers and have a conversation about how American culture is shaping our ideas about citizenship.

Since Robinson teaches in Iowa City, the conversation was doable. So the two of them sat down and warmed up by talking about John Ames, the country pastor at the heart of *Gilead*, who says things like “Grace has a grand laughter in it,” and “Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense.” But it was clear that the president didn’t really want to talk about Robinson’s fiction. He wanted to talk about her nonfiction, especially a recent essay in which she wrote about the role that fear is playing in our politics, our democracy, and our culture.

“Why was fear an important topic” he asked her, “and how does it connect to some of the other work that you’ve been doing?”¹

Her two-part thesis was simple, Robinson said: 1) contemporary America is full of fear and 2) fear is not a Christian habit of mind. Even if you subtract “Christian,” fear remains dangerous to any democratic nation, since the basis of democracy is the willingness to assume well about other people.

“You have to assume that basically people want to do the right thing,” Robinson said. “I think you can look around society and see that basically people do the right thing. But when people begin to make these conspiracy theories and so on, that make it seem as if what is apparently good is in fact sinister...”

“Yes,” the president said.

The idea of the “sinister other,” Robinson said, “I mean, that’s bad under all circumstances. But when it’s brought home, when it becomes part of our own political conversation about ourselves, I think that really is about as dangerous a development as there could be in terms of whether we continue to be a democracy.”

Since the president didn’t ask her for examples, I thought I’d supply a few that show up in the letters to the editor:

- 1) Our mounting fear of those who do not speak our language or speak it with an accent.
- 2) The widening gap between the decency with which most of us live our daily lives and the indecency with which we speak of those who oppose our politics.
- 3) The support we give one another in demonizing those who do not agree with us.
- 4) The ease with which we assume they want to do the *wrong* thing, and that our duty is to prevent them from doing it any way we can, even if it means acting in ways that demean both us and them.

“I think one of the things that is true,” Robinson said, “is that many Americans on every side of every issue, they think that the worst thing you can say is the truest thing you can say.”

And that is a problem why? Where would CNN or Fox be without the American appetite for tart political talk, not to mention Kimmel, Fallon, and Colbert? Am I the only person here who is tuning into political debates not because I want to think more deeply about the issues but because I have a cringeworthy need to know what You-Know-Who will say next?

The president interrupted my train of thought. “Tell me a little bit about how your interest in Christianity converges with your concerns about democracy,” he asked Robinson. “Well,” she said, “I believe that people are images of God.”

¹ This and all other quotations are from “President Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa, published in *The New York Review of Books* (November 5, 2015). Accessed 2/19/2016 at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/05/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation/>

There's no alternative that is theologically respectable to treating people in terms of that understanding. What can I say? It seems to me as if democracy is the logical, the inevitable consequence of this kind of religious humanism at its highest level. And it [applies] to everyone. It's the human image. It's not any loyalty or tradition or anything else; it's being human that enlists the respect, the love of God being implied in it.

Ob, that.

Did you just feel a little letdown, a little drop in your cortisol level? I did. Can't we argue about something? Can't we at least agree on the greatest danger facing the nation right now, so that we can get all cranked up about it over lunch and forget about how scared we are for a little while, how lost and lonely we sometimes feel? It feels a lot stronger to focus on a real threat, after all, than it does to jump every time a door slams because there are too many terrors to name, and half of them living above their means inside our own heads. It feels a lot better to agree that we can never be too safe than it does to face the possibility that our safety is not (shall we say) the most Christian of our concerns.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

If anyone ever had reason to hurl invective and take arm against the enemy, this is the man. He did not invent the conspiracy against him. His opponents had identified him as the problem—the real and present threat to their safety, the manifest source of all their woes. They did not doubt their logic. Their certainty was their strength. They supported one another in drawing a target with his face on it and they had no reservations about taking aim.

And what did he do? Opened his wings. Gave his cheek to his betrayer. Healed the hurt of an arresting officer. Kept falling for the image of God. I'm not saying any of us could do the same, but it does seem like we could at least handle a national election without putting targets on each other's heads.

"If we could all just turn off the media for a week," Robinson said near the end of her interview, "I think we could come out the other side of it with a different anthropology in effect. I wish we could have a normal politics where I disagree with people, they present their case, we take a vote, and if I lose I say, yes, that's democracy. I'm on the losing side of a meaningful vote."²

"And I'll try to make a better argument next time," the president said.

"Exactly," she said.

"But that does require a presumption of goodness in other people," he said.

"Absolutely," she said.

² From part two of the same interview in the *New York Review of Books* (November 19, 2015). Accessed 2/19/2016 at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/19/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation-2/>

If that doesn't convince you of the complete impracticality of the Christian gospel then I don't know what will, but if you're looking for a Lenten discipline, here's a pretty good one: presume goodness in other people; put away your sword; keep opening your wings to the image of God in friend and stranger; don't watch your back. Just until Easter! Then you can give it all up, since the one who gave it all up for you will be right there clucking at you, looking like a safer bet than any fox you ever feared.

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