

## Heirs Through Hope Beyond the Violence

▼ Sermon on Sunday February 18 — First in Lent 2018 ▼

*For Christ also suffered for sins once for all,  
The righteous for the unrighteous,  
In order to bring you to God.  
He was put to death in the flesh,  
But made alive in the spirit.  
—1 Peter 3: 18*

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This we believe, or believe we believe. But what does it mean? An indisputably righteous man suffered for the unrighteous. *He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in spirit—in order to bring you to God.*

The crucifixion was an act of official violence—a collusion among jealous local priests and indifferent Roman politicians. Even in a society like this one where, in some parts, state-sponsored death penalty is practiced, executions are not as gruesome as crucifixion. Poisoning the accused may not be painless, but it is certainly not so violent as the morbid cutting and piercing of a convict's flesh. Just the same, we believe that the foundational event of Christian history was a vicious act of violence. Yet we consider it as somehow necessary so that we, the unrighteous, can be made alive in the spirit.

This is the troubling question of Lent. How, indeed, are we to understand the idea that we are saved by violence? *He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in spirit—in order to bring you to God.* As Luk reminded last week, Peter the disciple, three times denied Jesus. *This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times* [Matthew 26:34]. The fact is that those closest to Jesus, then and now, seldom keep the faith perfectly well.

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These are harsh words. I would be the last among us to pronounce them from on high. Not a day in my life ends without a brooding over the errors of my ways. On Sunday, I meant to praise someone but feared that I had insulted him. On Monday, I talked too much in a meeting. On Tuesday, when I asked Elise if I had, she said, “Perhaps, just a little too much.” That night I fretted about that. On Wednesday, a passing moment with the person I feared I had insulted did not resolve the fear. On Thursday ... and so on. Lent is meant for cogitations like these. Fretting is personal and often weird.

Frets are symptoms of a deeper, if neurotic, human capacity to look at oneself, ultimately to recognize sin. When common place frets sink-in they also sink down to a deeper spiritual place—where nonsense is distinguished from reality. There, they settle in the sands of sin. There they bubble and boil.

But sin is never purely personal, never simply acts done by individuals alone. Sin is inspired by temptations and social forces that come down on us. Socially structured evil, strictly speaking, is demonic. Anthony Giddens, the sociologist, has remarked that the 20th century was the most violent in human history. It is impossible to find a period in that century free of open warfare, ethnic cleansing, civil strife, or tribal conflict. So far, it seems unlikely that the moral arc of 21st century will bend toward peace, much less justice. Collective violence is the source of sin. Sin thus understood is structured into human society. We are responsible for what we do or fail to do, but social forces trigger and tempt. The Romans and jealous priests who crucified Him, knew not what they doing because their violence was executed in the name of a higher cause.



Hence the hard place of the faith we attempt to practice. Lent is the rock that grinds hard against our taste for violence—in the movies and programs we watch or are tempted to watch, in cable news talkers whose clever cuts echo our loathing of some or another personage, in the neglect of the needy nearby or across the Green. Violence takes many forms.

It is common among (so-called) lesser animals to kill and eat each another. If the lions on the Serengeti could think and talk as we do, they surely would not call the killing of antelopes for food an act of violence. It would be to them a mercy after a long dry season. All creatures kill and consume other living things (including vegetables). We, however, are the creatures who call the killing of others violence—a practice that is particularly poignant when there is no meal involved. Human violence can be, and often is, wanton—without any necessary purpose.

Plus which, Christians alone—among adherents to other world religions—make a meal of the body and blood of the One we worship. The body and blood we consume in the Eucharist are symbolic of course—but symbols are true in their way, thus real. *He was put to death in the flesh...* This we celebrate week after week.

The long, still chilly weeks of Lent lead us to Holy Week, the culmination of which is not so much Easter as Good Friday. Easter Sunday will make no sense without serious attention to Friday's passion. On Easter, this church will be packed; on Good Friday, not so much.

But this one Friday to come ought not be a casual Friday. *In order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh*—not exactly what anyone wants to spend a Spring afternoon thinking about.



René Girard, the late, great French philosopher, helps explain the irony of Good Friday as, in the phrase he made famous, *one of the things hidden since the foundation of the world*. Good Friday is the account of an act of violence like those humans have done since the beginning of time.

For Girard the crucifixion was *scapegoating*. Girard explains that, in effect, the urge within for aggression requires—yes, *requires*—a scapegoat to atone for the deeper feelings that boil up in all human communities. Of these deep but common feelings the deepest may well be the fear of strangers. Those who killed Jesus did it because his very presence upset their ways and riled their feelings. The scapegoat is a sacrificial offering meant to expel or otherwise kill what we fear. The slain goat serves to put at ease the contradictions of the moral life. St Paul said it better even than Freud: *For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do* [Romans 7:19].

There are many ways—some vile, some ordinary—by which human beings scapegoat. Nations deport those some think don't belong here. Kids on playgrounds shun each other, just as couples and friends give each other skunk therapy—the silent treatment. Violence is as human as can be. It is our shared sin. We need a scapegoat to save us from the worst we might do.



This year our Lenten theme is *Heirs through hope*—a line taken from the prayer of thanksgiving for the Eucharist: *... We are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs, through hope, of thy everlasting kingdom.*

To be members incorporate means, literally, that we become what we are by taking *into* our bodies the material symbols of what He took *on* his body. We give ourselves over to the righteous One *... who suffered for sins once for all ... in order to bring us to God.*

Lent washes over us when we rediscover the innocence we once enjoyed as children when, truly, *faith was the substance of things hoped for*. Some of us may have forgotten that children, in their innocence, reach out to others because they know they need simple truths. *Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven* [Matthew 18:3].

But we enter the kingdom not because we are smart but only when we know that the simplest truth of life is compassion for and with others—literally, to be compassionate is *to feel with* others. As Henri Nouwen put it: *Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish*. Lent is the season of simple things—of which feeling for and with others is about as simple as life gets.

We need to become children again so we can feel the pain with Him. *He was put to death in the flesh, that we may be alive in the spirit*. We are heirs through hope, the hope of child-like innocence, and of the compassion it makes possible.

—Preacher was Charles Lemert