

The Six Deadly Sins of Holy Week

The Nail of Pride	Mark 12:38-40
The Nail of Betrayal	Matthew 26:47-50
The Nail of Envy	Matthew 20:20-28
The Nail of Indecision	Matthew 27:20-24
The Nail of Cruelty	Matthew 27:27-31, 39-42
The Nail of Hatred	Luke 6:22, 32-35

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Over the years, I've preached a good number of sermons on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter. It is one of my favorite Sundays of the year, what with the palms and "All Glory, Laud, and Honor," my favorite hymn of the year. Throughout all these years of Palm Sundays, I have resisted using this Sunday before Easter as Passion Sunday, the way many churches celebrate it, rather than Palm Sunday. The Lectionary appoints alternate readings for the day, but I never wanted to steal Good Friday's thunder, and so I never did. Until today. So we will celebrate both. We've waved our palms, and sang my favorite hymn, so I'm feeling comforted. But isn't this the year we've decided to "Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable?" So, this Sunday, I'll be the uncomfortable one and wade into the passion story, especially for those who won't be here on Good Friday, and hopefully not at the expense of those who will.

In many Christian traditions, the Good Friday Liturgy, which is when the entire passion narrative is read, is a Three Hours Liturgy, a period of worship which marks the time during which darkness came over the whole land, following

the raising of the cross on Golgotha and lasting until Jesus had breathed his last, when the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. As Presbyterian preachers are known around the world for their tendency to expound fully and completely, and often at great length, on the Biblical texts placed before them, and as we have now read six passages of Scripture, you may be wondering if you have indeed stumbled upon one of these Three Hours' Liturgies. I can, however, assure you that the length of the sermon shall be inversely proportional to the length of the readings.

In some ways, the Good Friday story speaks for itself. Through conspiracies both benign and calculated, Jesus of Nazareth met an untimely demise nailed to a cross in one of the Roman Empire's most brutal forms of execution. His followers bickered amongst themselves, and betrayed and deserted him; the civil authorities hid behind public opinion and the religious authorities behind false piety; the military took their whacks and the civilians their verbal barbs; and in the end, the Son of God cried out again with a loud voice and breathed his last. There was plenty of sin and responsibility to go around, plenty of nails, real and symbolic, pounded into tender flesh, plenty of sorrow and grief, plenty of unfulfilled hopes and shattered dreams.

The story also speaks for itself because on any given Friday, and not just on "Good" Friday, through conspiracies both benign and calculated the same sins are repeated and we either see them with our own eyes, or commit them with our own

hands or hearts or mouths, or read about them in the newspaper or on our computer screens. The details may be different and the issues may be ones unknown in Biblical times, but the sins are the same and the result is the same: sons and daughters of God, abandoned, humiliated and left for dead, not on crosses, but in schools and institutions and refugees camps and battlefields and sweatshops and marriages and churches and indeed in any place where human beings congregate. The Holy Week story speaks for this Passion Sunday, too, and it is tempting to let it do just that, and move on to happier themes.

But we are a people for whom the phrase “faith seeking understanding” has great value. And so we dig a little deeper. The theme of this service is “the nails of the cross,” and the chosen Scripture passages lend themselves to attaching a nameable sin to six of the symbolic nails used to crucify Jesus: pride, betrayal, envy, indecision, cruelty and hatred. They are, of course, not the only sins which contributed to the days’ events, but these six proved deadly for Jesus that day, and it is appropriate to remember them this day. The only trouble with assigning numbers to sins, however, is that it is hard to prevent the mind from wandering to that ancient list of the “Seven Deadly Sins.” I confess that not only was I not above the temptation, but also that I could not remember all seven.

And so, to satisfy my curiosity, I had to look up the “seven deadly sins” on the Internet, and while surfing, I came upon a rather unique website, the purpose of which is to provide a completely anonymous forum for persons to confess their

sins according to the categories provided by the big seven. It is not a website for the squeamish, but if you can get beyond the sometimes course language and the ones that are clearly deposited on the site for their shock value, you'll find some honest and searching confessions of sin. Allow me to read but a few of them for you:

- I am a pretty greedy type. I never learnt to share. But at least I was not so avaricious as my brother who used to steal our toys and sell them back to us to supplement his pocket money.
- I was a salesman. I convinced an old lady to buy a very expensive computer. I did it for the commission. What's an old lady going to do with a Pentium 3 and games software?
- Or, one of my personal favorites, less a confession of sin than a confession of bad taste: Whoever invented the idea of chicken and waffles together is like unto a god.

These are among the more amusing submissions to this unusual website, but there are plenty more whose edge is less humorous and quite a bit more painful, like these:

- Forgive me father for having failed you. I ate to the point where I couldn't even breathe. I repent. Have mercy on me.
- I am the biggest hypocrite that ever lived.
- I don't love my wife of fifteen years anymore. I don't even like her. But I can't leave because I love my kids too much.
- I was bored and looked at a porno site. I'm only 12. Yikes! My mom is pretty lenient about those things but I still feel bad...confessing makes me feel better.
- Confession: misery. Everyone, and I do mean everyone, I meet likes me. They all think I'm great. Only I know better. I hate myself for no other reason than for being me.
- Men have eating disorders too...not just women. Women are just as hard on men about their bodies as men are on women. The only difference is that men aren't supposed to talk about this kinda stuff so I am silent and dying.
- Why didn't I try to help that starving kitten?

- I envy those who have a soul mate to talk to, confide in, and love.

You will note that not all of these confessions are of the standard-issue variety. Some are posed as questions, others as statements of fact, and others as longing cries for help or companionship or compassion. But what they all have in common is a brutal sort of honesty that is appropriate for a day on which we commemorate a honest sort of brutality, the kind practiced by the various players in the Good Friday drama, each wielding one of the day's six deadly sins. And perhaps it is the same honest sort of brutality we run the risk of practicing should we find ourselves attributing Good Friday to a too-narrowly-defined understanding of God's will.

You see, I've heard it said that Good Friday was carefully orchestrated by God to happen, just the way it did, so that certain ancient prophecies might be fulfilled. God engineered everything from Judas to Pilate, from soup to nuts because Jesus had to die in this way, with this cast of characters, with not an iota out of place for the whole salvation thing to work. It's very tidy, really. But it is wishful thinking. This is wishful thinking that absolves us of all responsibility, for it was really, after all is said and done, exactly what God wanted. Friends, this is the easy way out, a position that too easily lifts the burden of responsibility for sin off our own backs, and a position that makes us divine marionettes, pre-programmed to sin at the pull of a string. And it is a position that does the Scriptures themselves a great injustice, reducing them not to a testament of God's

faithfulness in spite of us, but to a record of our attempts to create God in our own image, or to see God as we want or need to see God, or to think that God is in complete control of the minutest detail of our lives, or to believe that God really cares which team wins the state basketball tournament. You see, putting aside the occasional hardening of Pharaoh's heart, it is rare that the Biblical writers experience God as a master manipulator, but rather they know God as one who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, even while holding us accountable. God doesn't need to pull our strings for us because God loves us enough to give us enough rope to hang ourselves and the occasional Messiah too. Free will is both a blessing and a curse, but it is well-attested in Scripture.

I say this because if we are able to remove ourselves from the drama of the Holy Week story by attributing it to divine will instead of free will, we are then able to remove ourselves from our contributions to the reality of this Holy Week or any given week, and from there it is but a short leap to thinking that it is only those other people who need to visit confessional websites to lay bare their souls and give witness to their unbearable pain. Perhaps Good Friday, when the story comes to its head, is called good because it is a reminder that God has given us the incredible gift of free will, free will that enables us to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions, even as we invariably commit the six or seven or dozen or hundred deadly sins that crucified Jesus and that kill and maim and destroy

today and that lead people to confess horrible things done by them and done to them.

Through conspiracies both benign and calculated, Jesus of Nazareth met an untimely demise nailed to a cross in one of the Roman Empire's most brutal forms of execution. We all know that is not the end of the story, praise be to God, and I will leave the good news of the resurrection for Easter morning. But what I will tell you is that hidden in the paradox of Good Friday is the good news that the same free will that crucified Jesus can proclaim him, and that through conspiracies both benign and calculated, we are able to do more than simply count the sins of the day. We are able to own them, and confess them, and then change our ways and truly become an Easter people. Praise be to God for the upcoming Holy Week, and Good Friday and for every day that gives us the power to seek forgiveness. Amen.