

Playing With the Darkness

Luke 22: 14-23

Maundy Thursday/ 5th April 2007

Which one, indeed. “Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this (Luke 22: 23).” This, being betrayal. This is the question, the shadow that hovers over this meal on the eve of Jesus’ death. As they gather to celebrate the Passover meal of liberation, Jesus changes the subject and talks honestly with his friends about betrayal, about broken bread mysteriously connected with one broken life for the healing of many broken lives. It’s a dark, somber meal. Sure, Jesus extends the hope of sharing another meal with them under better circumstances. Of course. But we must not go there too fast. We can’t ignore or deny what takes place between these meals.

There’s something within us that doesn’t want to sit long in shadow or pain or darkness. Sometimes that can be a good thing – to avoid pain. But other times the ego chooses to avoid the things that disturb us most, usually at our peril and others’. We might go from the festival procession of Palm Sunday to the joy of Easter morning, but never really walk with Jesus *through* the events of the week, to remember this meal, the disloyalty, the treachery, the suffering, the shadow, the death. We don’t like staying in dark places for long.

A few months ago, I was back in New Jersey for my father’s 75th birthday and went to worship at a neighboring Presbyterian church and was struck by a story I heard. The associate pastor arrived home one evening to find his house with no lights on. Alarmed, he went in looking for his wife and their very young children. He couldn’t see a thing. But when he went into the living room his eyes could focus just enough to see that there was a tent propped up in the middle of the room, with just a hint of light coming through the canopy.

Curious, he approached the tent still very concerned, and asked, “What are you doing?” The children climbed out of the tent and cried, “Daddy! Daddy! We’re playing with the darkness.”

In Christian enthusiasm for divine light, the Christian tradition has not always done justice to the importance of darkness. There’s a strong influence of dualism in the church (which is often more Gnostic than Christian), where we divide up the world between the sacred as good and the secular as bad, between good and evil, light and dark. We thus conceive of a God “that is totally purged of anything we might call dark.” While there are plenty of verses in scripture that say “God is light” and Jesus is the light that can never be overwhelmed by darkness and of the heavenly place as full of light where there is neither day nor night, there are also verses which seem to suggest that God is not afraid of the dark, like Psalm 97:2, “Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.” Or Psalm 18:11, “He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water.”

There is weakness within Christianity as it is popularly conceived which focuses on the light at the expense of the darkness. It’s a serious flaw because “when we try to live up to the standards of a God that [we believe] is purely light” and then look at ourselves, we can’t handle it; “we can’t handle the darkness within us.”¹ And because we can’t handle the depth of human darkness, we suppress it. But the more we suppress it and deny it’s there, the more dangerous it becomes because we then project it on others and say evil dwells over there in him or her, forgetting that the line between evil and good goes right through every human heart. Which one will betray him? Which one? It can’t be me. I’m not like that. I’m not

¹David Steindl-Rast, “The Shadow in Christianity” in “Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams, ed., Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1991), pp. 132-137. I am indebted to this provocative chapter as the impetus for this sermon.

like Judas. Or am I?

Martin Luther (1483-1536) said a theology of the cross “calls a thing what it actually is.”² In other words, the whole drama of the cross, indeed the entire scope of Jesus’ life is about telling the truth and getting us to tell the truth about ourselves and the world so we can be set free.³ In this sense Jesus is thoroughly realistic and calls us to be too – leaving no room for fantasy or illusion or denial about who we are as broken images of God, about the darkness in the human heart, about the violence we are capable of inflicting upon others and ourselves and even upon the flesh of God.

The good we have no problem seeing, but the evil within us – now, that’s getting personal. Although, I know many who can only see evil or bad in themselves and can’t see the good. Wisdom beckons us to see not either/or, but both/and.

There is a Hasidic story that goes like this: “The son of a Rabbi went to worship on the Sabbath in a nearby town. On his return, his family asked, ‘Well, did they do anything different from what we do here?’ ‘Yes, of course,’ said the son. ‘Then what was the lesson?’ ‘Love thy enemy as thyself.’ ‘So, it’s the same as we say. And how is it you learned something else?’ ‘They taught me to love the enemy within myself.’”⁴

Many tell me this service that ends with *tenebrae* (Latin for darkness or shadow) is one of their favorite services of the year.

² Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 16, taken from Luther’s “Ninety-Five Theses” of 1517, specifically thesis #20 & #21: “He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. A theology of glory [*theologia gloriae*] calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross [*theologia crucis*] calls the thing what it actually is.” Luther offered a theology of the cross over and against a theology of glory so prevalent in the history of the church. Hall’s book is a significant, contemporary reflection on this critical insight for the contemporary church.

³ This is most evident in John’s gospel, see John 1:14, 17; 4:23, 24; 8:32; 8:40; 8:45, 46; 14:6; 14:17; 18:37.

⁴ Eric Neuman, *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic* (London, 1969), cited in Zweig & Abrams, 190.

There is something about this service, particularly worshipping at night. If you think about it, where else in our worship life are we invited to “know the dark,” in Wendell Berry’s (b. 1934) telling phrase, allowing this very dark story to touch the deepest parts of our lives?⁵ Here, we get to play with the darkness – to confront things we would rather not see within ourselves and in the world, to see and not ignore the depth of human pain, suffering, and misery that continue to crucify God’s children in which we are all still somehow complicit, to be able to say, like Shakespeare (1564-1616), “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.” “This thing of darkness I acknowledge *mine*.” *Mine*. A confession, I believe, which can only be said because of grace.

The Christian tradition as it has evolved might have problems with embracing the darkness, but – *thank God* – Jesus didn’t and *doesn’t*. He’s not afraid of shadow and shows us on the cross how he actually embraces the darkness. We see this strongest in John’s gospel when Jesus cries, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” “At that moment darkness covers the whole earth...at that moment God reaches the greatest distance from God’s own being and embraces the darkness of utmost alienation.” “If God can make that embrace, then everything can be embraced, death and life and everything in between.”⁶ It’s through embracing, not *denying* the darkness that salvation comes.⁷ God embraces it *all* in grace and *by* grace we are free to do the same.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs
Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland

⁵ Wendell Berry, “To go into the dark with a light is to/ know the light./ To know the dark, go dark./ Go without sight, and find that the dark, too,/ blooms and sings,/ and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.”

⁶ Steindl-Rast, 132.

⁷ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin by Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), “One thing that comes out in myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.”