**Finding Ourselves in the Crowd**

A sermon by the Rev. Christopher Wendell

Good Friday, April 18, 2014

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

*May there be peace within us, peace among us, and may we not be instruments of our own or others’ oppression.*

This month, the global community marks the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan Genocide – that massive destruction of human life in which one tribe, the Hutus, slaughtered a fellow tribe, the Tootsies, with the goal of complete eradication. It was chaos. Hutu citizens of Rwanda found themselves swept up in the violent anarchy being fomented by a handful of political and tribal leaders, to the point where ordinary people became murderers of their co-workers, neighbors, even friends. The horror of this swift, bloody, and merciless violence is really impossible to get my mind around.

Last week, I heard a story on NPR in which a reporter recounted her interview with a Hutu man who had been convicted of killing a dozen of his friends and close associates during the genocide. He even had murdered his own god-child. After it was all over and he was in jail, he could not recount why he had done this; how he had become part of the violent, murderous crowd. Neither he, nor the reporter, had any explanation for what motivated his actions – for what had turned a regular person into a perpetrator of genocide.

In addition to the Rwandan Genocide, we are in the midst of a second genocide remembrance this month, as well. Beginning tomorrow, global Jewish communities will observe Yom Hashoah, a day set aside each year to remember the Holocaust, in which 6 million Jews were slaughtered over a period of years in Europe. Some Jews mark this observance tomorrow, on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, while others will do so later in the month. St. Paul’s will be co-sponsoring an observance on Friday evening May 2nd at Temple Shalom Emeth in Burlington. Christians have a special responsibility to learn about, teach about, and publically remember the Holocaust, because so many of our ancestors in the faith were complicit in that genocide – through overt violence, silent cooperation, general indifference, and willful ignorance. I sometimes find myself guilty of historicizing the Holocaust – thinking that I would never be involved in something like this. Participating in these observances reminds me that many, many Christians in the 1940’s probably thought the same thing about themselves, until, by their action or their inaction, they too become part of the violent crowd.

And that phenomenon is what is on my mind this year as I listen to the Passion. How we too, become part of the crowd. How we too, somehow become complicit in cycles of violence. Perhaps not to the extent of genocide or deicide, but violence nonetheless. After all, the Crowd is our role in the play. We give voice to the words of the nameless, faceless, ambiguous crowd; one that seems intent on violently rejecting Jesus and his ministry of reconciliation.

So who was this crowd? Whose voices are those, anyway?

One thing to notice right away, is that in our Passion Script (as in many), the Congregation actually voices several different groups of people at different times in the story. First, the congregation voices the crowd of religious police looking for Jesus in the pre-dawn Good Friday hours. Next, they voice a crowd speaking privately to Pilate. Though that crowd is given the label of “The Jews” in fact it is likely a small number of religious leaders from Caiaphas’ inner circle. In the next scene, Pilate is outside in front of a larger crowd, again referred to as “The Jews”, who demand Barabbas’ release. But this crowd likely contained Jewish leaders, their supporters, regular Jewish residents of Jerusalem, pilgrims of various kinds, non-Jews who were attracted to the spectacle, and others as well. Just a moment later, the congregation takes the voice of a crowd of Roman soldiers mocking Jesus whom they have dressed up as a king in some kind of sick ritual. Next, the crowd speaking is a group of chief priests. Then it is the public gathering again. And back to the chief priests again, and then the Roman soldiers. Our voice keeps shifting back and forth and back and forth from one “crowd” to another. You need a scorecard to keep it all straight.

Some might argue that this is sloppy script-writing – and in a way it is. It becomes nearly impossible to know who is speaking, and from what motivation. But this bad dramaturgy it is good theology - because it underscores the point that many, many different groups of people united to reject Jesus in his final hours. Some may have been motivated in their rejection by a fear of losing religious authority. Some may have been motivated by a desire to maintain political order or a desire to make nice with the occupying soldiers for their own survival or profit. Some may have been motivated by a desire to follow orders, to do what they were told was the pious or dutiful thing. And, as was the case with the Hutu man who killed his own god-child, I would bet that some in these crowds would not be able to tell you why they had such violent rejection in their hearts towards Jesus.

The point is that many people, Jews and gentiles, Jerusalemites and travelers and soldiers, Colonial rulers and co-opted indigenous leaders, all rejected Jesus in his hour of need. All these groups and crowds are responsible. And each of those voices is ours. We are the soldier, the high priest, the pilgrim, the God-fearer, the passer-by. We, all humanity, are the deniers of God’s presence among us. Even the disciples, largely absent in this drama, speak their rejection of God loudest in their silent flight.

Through the centuries, followers of Jesus have tried to side-step our own complicity in his death by locating blame on just one small part of the crowd – usually “the Jews” or their leaders – in an effort to thereby absolve ourselves. It’s important to note that Jesus himself never does this, though Christians have, again and again. It began early, by the end of the first century in the writing of John’s Gospel, and it recurred through the centuries, often leading to catastrophic levels of violence. But this racist and shameful way of dealing with our own guilt only perpetuates the cycles of violence from which Jesus’ life and death and rising were meant to free us.

I am always amazed at the power of violence to unite people who are otherwise at odds. If you’ve ever been in a middle school cafeteria you’ve probably seen this phenomenon at work: the solidification of social bonding in the rejection of someone else. The labels for the uncool kids change from year to year, the phenomenon is ancient. It is the phenomenon of scapegoating – creating unity by rejecting or persecuting a common enemy. In fact, in Luke’s account of the Passion, there’s actually a line that notes that the day Jesus was condemned to die, “Herod and Pilate became friends. Before this, they had been enemies.”

Though we, as the crowd, all speak with one voice in this Passion play, we know how different each group is that makes up this one voice. And that is the scariest part of all -- how hatred and violence and rejection can unite such disparate groups of people in service of evil.

In his life, Jesus offered the world the exact opposite. He tried to unite all people in the divine ministry of reconciliation. The resistance he encountered was instead the human urge to unite around violence. But even in his suffering, Jesus continued to offer humanity an opportunity to unite around forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. He remained differentiated from the crowd. He stood against the culture of death. He would not allow himself to be united into the shared bond of violence. And so, from the Cross, he says “Father, Forgive them for they know not what they do.”

The “them” whom Jesus forgives from the Cross are not just his disciples. Not just the soldiers or the Jewish authorities. Not just Pilate. Not just the passer-bys who watch in self-proclaimed innocence. But everyone. Everyone who tries to ensure their own safety and position in the way they reject Jesus…whether 2,000 years ago, or today. For we are “them”, too.

We need this forgiveness. I need this forgiveness. Each day, you and I are involved in systems that create an exclusive unity through violence – and we do not differentiate ourselves from them. We purchase goods created through exploitation of others. We fail to openly stand up in support of victims when there are social or economic costs to us. We perpetrate our own small acts of micro-aggression against those who are in some way different. We are all involved in the rejection of Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation. We all stand in need of the forgiveness Jesus offers from the Cross.

Today, we feel that need. We let our own brokenness be real for us. We know, thankfully, that we are not in that need alone, but share it with every broken human heart. For when we share our brokenness with each other, we can finally begin to be free from the cycles of violence that dominate our world; and we can begin the work of finding unity in the place that Jesus showed us: in our solidarity with each other. Amen.