

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 27:15-26

March 22, 2015

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

The Crosses of Lent
THE BUCK STOPS AT THE CROSS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When I sat down at my computer on Thursday morning to write this sermon, Fernando Ortega was on Pandora radio singing “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded.”

*O sacred head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down;
now scornfully surrounded with thorns, thine only crown;
O sacred head, what glory, what bliss till now was thine!
Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call thee mine.*

*What thou, my Lord, has suffered was all for sinners' gain:
mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Savior! 'Tis I deserve thy place;
look on me with thy favor, and grant to me thy grace.*

*What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend,
for this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?
O make me thine forever; and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to thee.*

Listen again to the beginning of the second verse: “*What thou, my Lord, has suffered was all for sinners' gain: mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.*” That sounds a lot like the second verse of the hymn we sang just before the gospel reading this morning:

*Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee.*

But we weren't even there on the “hill far away” 2000 years ago! How can the transgression be ours? How can we be guilty? How can we have brought this upon Jesus? How have we denied Jesus?

How do you answer the questions asked in our last hymn today?

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Where you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?*

Obviously we weren't **There There** when "they" crucified my Lord, when "they" nailed him to the tree, when "they" pierced him in the side, when "they" laid him in the tomb? After all, that happened **There** in 1st century Palestine and we **Are** here in 21st century Wallace, NC! Someone said this week, "Jesus is still alive and we believe he is with us all the time." Yes, we do believe that, and that means we all are faced with the truth that we "betray and deny him, forget and doubt him" — with our silence, with our inaction, when we fail to love God and our neighbors. As someone has said, "What gave the church the idea that only **other** people betrayed Jesus?"¹

While he was president, Harry Truman had a 2.5" X 13" sign on his desk that read "The Buck Stops Here." The sign was made in the Federal Reformatory at El Reno, Oklahoma. Fred A. Canfil, then United States Marshal for the Western District of Missouri and a friend of President Truman, saw a similar sign while visiting the Reformatory and asked the Warden if a sign like it could be made for President Truman. The sign was made and mailed to the President on October 2, 1945.

The saying "the buck stops here" derives from the slang expression, "pass the buck," which means passing the responsibility on to someone else. The latter expression is said to have originated with the game of poker, in which a marker or counter, frequently in frontier days a knife with a buckhorn handle, was used to indicate the person whose turn it was to deal. If the player did not wish to deal he could pass the responsibility by passing the "buck," as the counter came to be called, to the next player.

In his farewell address to the American people given in January 1953, President Truman referred to this concept very specifically in asserting that, "The President-- whoever he is--has to decide. He can't pass the buck to anybody. No one else can do the deciding for him. That's his job."²

There's a lot of "passing the buck" in Jesus' trial. On Friday morning, the chief priests and the elders of the people handed him over to Pilate the governor. Judas repented and tried to give back the thirty pieces of silver, but the chief priests and the elders said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." (Which, by the way, is the same thing Pilate says to the crowd after he washes his hands of the whole affair) Pilate tried to get the crowd to make his decision for him by offering Jesus Barabbas or Jesus called the Christ. Three times Pilate appeals to the crowd: "Whom do you want me to release? Which of the two do you want me to release for you? What should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" (Matthew 27:17, 21, 22)

Tragically, over the centuries, many people have “passed the buck” to the Jewish people as a whole. In the worst situations, Jews have been (and continue to be) called “Christ-killers,” with the inevitable horrific, tragic, and anti-Semitic results in history. It’s true that Matthew tells us about the crowd demanding, “Let him be crucified!” and accepting responsibility, “His blood be on us and on our children!” But Matthew isn’t making a pronouncement about **all** Jews in **all** times and **all** places. He is telling us that Israel (“the people,” no longer “the crowd”) is rejecting Jesus who is called the Messiah by choosing the one called Jesus Barabbas — they are choosing the rabble-rouser, Zealot, revolutionary Jesus Barabbas rather than the way of the other Jesus.

That danger lurking in this particular verse is one reason we’re using portions of “A Declaration of Faith” from the former Presbyterian Church in the United States as our Affirmation of Faith today:

*We confess that in the execution of Jesus
the sin of the human race reached its depths.
The only innocent One was condemned and put to death,
**not by the sinfulness of one nation,
but by the sinfulness of us all.**
In the presence of Jesus,
who lived out what God wants us all to be,
we were threatened beyond endurance.
Blinded by our rebellion against our Creator,
we killed his Son when we met him face to face.*

That’s strong language there at the end — “**We** killed his Son when **we** met him face to face.” Once again, we could say, “But **we** weren’t there in the crowd that day outside Pilate’s headquarters. How can we possibly say, ‘**We** killed his Son’ or sing ‘mine was the transgression, thine the deadly pain’ or ‘’Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee?’”

Just a couple of days before Jesus was handed over to be crucified, he told his disciples a story about the Son of Man coming in all of his glory, gathering all of the nations before him, and judging them all. To one group he said, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” To the other group he said, “For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” To the first group he said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” To the second group he said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

Since Jesus is alive and present among us as our risen Lord and Savior, his words apply to us today just as much as they did to his disciples: “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” It’s so easy to pass the buck, though, isn’t it? It’s so tempting to choose Jesus Barabbas rather than Jesus who is called the Christ.

Someone asked me the other day, “Why are you reading ‘Jesus Barabbas’? My Bible just says Barabbas.” That’s a great question. I read this morning from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which does say, “At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. . . Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?’” (Matthew 27:16-17)

Many ancient manuscripts of the gospels call the “notorious prisoner” Barabbas, but a few call him “Jesus Barabbas.” As early as the 2nd century A.D., one of the church fathers named Origen commented that the name Jesus shouldn’t be assigned to anyone who was a sinner. That’s one reason some scholars think “Jesus Barabbas” might be the original version, and the church took the name “Jesus” out of the other manuscripts.

Think about it: “bar” means “son of,” as in “Simon, bar Jona” or “Simon, son of Jonah.” “Abba” means “father,” but it can really be translated much more intimately — something along the lines of “Daddy.” Barabbas, then, means “son of a father.” So, Jesus Barabbas means “Jesus, son of a father.” Can you see where this is going?

Pilate presents two men to the crowd. One is Jesus Barabbas, “son of a father.” The other one is Jesus who is called the Christ, who really *is* “the son of *the* Father.” There’s the choice. Will it be Jesus Barabbas and the way he represents (which many people think meant armed revolt against the Romans) or will it be Jesus called Christ and the way he represents (which is the way of God, the way of love and peace and obedience and trust in God no matter what)?

The chief priests and the elders and Pilate all passed the buck. Any one or all of them could have chosen Jesus called the Christ and the way he offered. Pilate could have dealt with Jesus of Nazareth without crucifying him. He had the power and authority. In fact, Pilate even asked, “What evil has he done?” Pilate thought he could escape responsibility for the man standing before him, by washing his hands of the whole affair. But you know what they say — not to decide is to decide.

It’s not just *those* people who deny or betray Christ. We’re still called to decide today, for or against Jesus who is called the Christ. And we’re still tempted to pass the buck — to deny, to betray, to doubt, to hide our faces, even to crucify.

Yes, there is a lot of passing the buck in this story about Jesus on trial, and a lot of passing the buck in our lives, even as Christians. But, thank God, the buck stops at the cross. Jesus didn’t pass on the responsibility, even when it was our sins he bore on the cross. Jesus didn’t take the path that led away from God’s plan. Instead, he bore our sorrow and pain on the cross. The apostle Paul puts it this way, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. . . For if while we were

enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:8, 10)

Let us pray: Almighty God, look with mercy on your family for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed and to be given over to the hands of sinners and to suffer death on the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), p. 1033.

²This information was found on the website of the Harry S. Truman Library & Museum at www.trumanlibrary.org/buckstop.htm.