

25-Mar-2018 Sermon

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There is a phenomenon in ethics or psychology or something, called the “Error of Attribution.” The Error of Attribution says that when I make a mistake, it’s due to outside forces. But when someone *else* makes a mistake, it’s due to character flaw. So when I’m late, it’s because traffic was heavy, car wouldn’t start, etc. When Fred is late, it’s because he’s lazy and can’t organize his time.

On Palm Sunday in this passage what is—humanly speaking--likely the high point of Jesus’ ministry on earth. People *get* it. He has entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, like the messiah would do. The people are shouting “Hosanna,” and laying down the branches and shouting, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David.” All of those things show that the people get it. And we get it.

But let’s be careful. Because the same people who were shouting “Hosanna” on Sunday would be shouting “Crucify Him” on the next Friday.

They had character flaws, I guess.

In Mark, chapter 14 Peter will tell Jesus, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And the other disciples said the same. But Peter *did* disown Him, and Matthew tells us that *all* the disciples deserted Jesus and fled. But we wouldn’t have done that, right?

In the first three chapters of the book of Romans, Paul spends 64 verses castigating Jews and Gentiles: Jews for hiding behind the Law with its great revelation and Gentiles for not acting on the little revelation that God had placed in their hearts. I’ll quote one verse: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things” (Rom 2:1). It’s the error of attribution. And he goes on, using stronger and stronger accusations against who?—“to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people,” according to chapter 1.

The No of God against the people of Jerusalem who shouted out, “Crucify Him!” The No of God against Peter who denied that he knew Jesus. The No of God against all humanity as represented by the church at Rome.

Let’s imagine watching the Seahawks: “It’s a key third down for the Hawks; there’s the snap, back goes Russell Wilson, and it’s a blitz.” And you’re going, “No, not a blitz!” “Back he goes!” And the linebackers are coming from both sides like lionesses going after a zebra. “No, no, no!” you shout at the television. Imagine *that* No.

But the No of God is not only the No of frustration, not only a No *about* us; it’s also a No *to* us. Because in each case when we reject God, we say, “Thanks, but—and I’m just being very honest here—I’d rather be my own God.” When the people told Pilate, “Crucify Him—we have no king but Caesar!” it was a bald-faced lie. The Jews hated Caesar. But they were willing to trade their Messiah for a king they hated. When Peter told the people around the fire, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about,” it was a bald-

faced lie, and in saying it he was repudiating his vow of allegiance, as a disciple, to a master. Paul writes of humanity and the Roman church, “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator...” (Rom 1:25).

And it’s us, in all three cases. Beware of the error of attribution. Because it’s my error and our error.

It’s worthy of note that in only one of those circumstances do the people involved show any remorse. That’s Peter, of course, who breaks down and weeps. There’s no mention that the people of Jerusalem shouted “Crucify Him—well, actually, we feel kinda bad saying that.” Paul writes of humanity, “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them” (Rom 1:32). So feelings are not always good guides to bring us to God.

God pronounces His No because we repudiate, we disown, we reject Him.

And this is not an oopsie. This is not like taking the wrong exit from the freeway, where all you need to do is go to the top of the hill and then head straight and get back on the freeway.

It’s more like there you are, driving in the mountains in the snow and you turn onto a small road because you think it’s the right way but it’s not, and eventually you’re miles from the main highway and miles from phone coverage and now your car is stuck in that snowstorm. There is no escape. “How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under wings,” said Jesus to the people of Jerusalem, “and you were not willing.” And then He adds, “Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Matt 23:37-38). It’s a dead end.

It’s not that Mark and Paul and the other biblical writers are pessimists. It’s not that they want to get all preachy at us or get all self-righteous on us. It’s not that they think there is nothing good in human endeavor or nothing noteworthy in human courage. They are not editorialists celebrating or criticizing what they see in the world. They understand the error of attribution and our tendency to see the best in things and to be above all, optimistic. But God speaks His No even to our act of shutting our ears to His No. Don’t think of the voice of Jonathan Edwards, bellowing on about the “Sinners in the hand of an angry God;” think instead of the voice of Mr. Rodgers, the sweetest voice, the voice that assures children that they are *loved*, saying that the No of God is an all-embracing No.

“Salvation appears as salvation only when all human escapes have been cut off” (C.G. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 25). Faith is the hearing of God’s No (ibid., p. 27). God *dissolves us*.

But. *God dissolves us*. The No of God “is all-embracing, since it proceeds from all-embracing affirmation” (Karl Barth, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 87). Now the Yes of God does not diminish His No. The Yes does not compensate for the No. The No does not turn into a Yes. But we can *hear* the No only in terms of the divine Yes. The Yes does not *diminish* the No, but it does *conquer* the No. God takes the windy, confusing, snow-laden road—the dead end—and makes it new.

And so, Philippians chapter 2. This passage is a triple threat: it acts, it sings, it dances! It’s like the Debbie Reynolds of the New Testament! And here we see that the person and the work of Jesus Christ is the Yes in which we can hear the No of God; it is our *reforming* after God dissolves us; and it is the means

by which our relationship with God is radically altered. That despite our rejecting Him, “He continues to name us His people so that we may be His people” (Barth, p. 93).

Philippians 2 is a treasure trove, but we’ll focus on three aspects of Jesus Christ: (1), that in Jesus is the *revelation* of God; (2), that in Jesus is the *reconciliation* of God; and (3) that in Jesus is the *exaltation*... now you expect me to say the “exaltation of God,” don’t you? And that’s true—He is the exaltation of God—but in Jesus also is the exaltation of *humankind*.

So let me take another run at it: (1), that in Jesus is the *revelation* of God; (2), that in Jesus is the *reconciliation* of God; and (3) that in Jesus is the *exaltation* of humankind.

And we’ll use the church in Rome, Peter, and the people of Jerusalem as our examples. And by doing this, we’ll tee ourselves up for holy week.

First, that in Jesus is the revelation of God. After 64 verses of invective about the No of God, Paul writes, “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known.... This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ...” (Rom 3:21-22). God’s righteousness *has been made known*....

I never knew my grandparents on my mother’s side; they died before I was born. And there were very few photographs of them. But if I were to think deeply about my aunts and uncles, if I were to study the photographs of them, I might be able to come up with an understanding of my grandparents—what they looked like, what their habits were, how they laughed.... But how much better if I *had* met them—spent time with them, lived with them, perhaps.

And so it is with God. Apart from Christ we might have some hints, some imprecise knowledge. But remember, the Bible says that God “lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Tim 6: 16). That’s not exactly a Rick Steves guide to visiting God and getting to know Him better.

But Philippians 2 says that Jesus is the has the very *form* of God. Furthermore, it is in His *servanthood* that Jesus reveals who God is. He is like the point of tangency, the point where the tangent of God intersects the circle of creation. He *is* the Rick Steves guide to the God who dwells in unapproachable light. He is like me living with my unknown grandparents.

Second, that in Jesus is the *reconciliation* of God. Peter is traumatized by his disowning of Jesus. But in Philippians we read that Jesus “became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” “In the death of Jesus Christ God has humiliated Himself” (Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 114); He took Peter’s place and released him from the dead-end. The abandonment into which Peter has fallen. And into which we have fallen. There are lots of metaphors in the New Testament about the meaning of the cross, and the reality is so rich that any one metaphor can’t itself do it justice. We would have to devote our lives to understand and live out those metaphors. Wait—that’s a good idea. And in this week, let’s remember the saying of Melanchthon, the Lutheran theologian and comrade of Luther, who wrote, “To know Christ is to know His benefits” (Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*).

Third, that in Jesus is the exaltation of humankind. So radically altered is our state of God—so much the reverse of the dead-end—that the writer of the Hebrews says, “What is humankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him? You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honor...” (Heb 2:6-7). In the resurrection, God raises humankind and frees us to live

a new life, the life of the Yes, to share “the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:9), not because of anything good in us—for God has already said His No to that—but because of the humiliation and obedience of His Son. And just as some of the people who shouted Hosanna on Sunday were crying out, “Crucify Him” on Friday, so some of them may have watched when Jesus ascended to the Father 40 days later. Some of them may have known that the break between the old world and the new world has occurred.

So God has given each of us a gift in this Holy Week, the gift of His Yes, of His revelation, of His reconciliation, and of our exaltation. And this is the week to thank Him. Because to know Christ is to know His benefits.