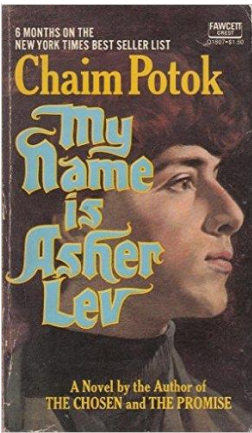


The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

March 30, 2018 – Good Friday

Transforming the Agony of the World



One of my favorite novelists is the American Jewish rabbi Chaim Potok. Potok's novels explore the diversity and tensions within the ultra-orthodox Hasidic streams of Judaism. One story from one of his novels stays with me. (slide) *My Name is Asher Lev* explores the story of a young Hasidic Jew, Asher Lev, who wants to be a visual artist, despite the serious reservations of his community against anything that might be interpreted as a violation of the commandment against making graven images. But he perseveres and becomes an accomplished painter. But the most serious break with his community comes as he comes to terms with the restrictions his mother feels. As he imagines how to portray his mother's suffering he is drawn to paint her hanging on a cross.



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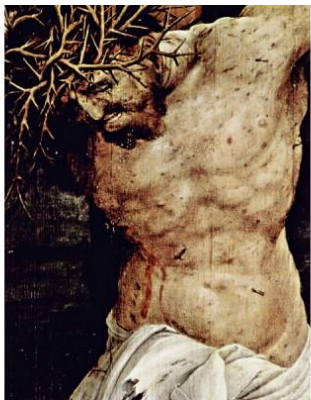
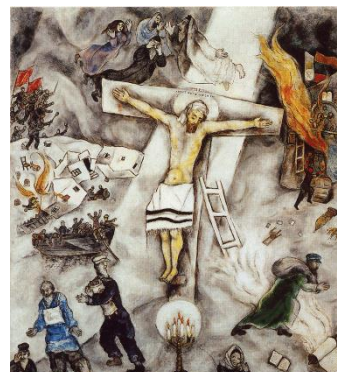


Figure 1 - Plague Christ – Matthias Grunewald

In the novel, the use of such an obvious Christian image by a Hasidic Jew creates a serious scandal in his community, but what struck me about it was how the image of Jesus on the cross has a universal meaning that transcends Christian interpretation of it. What we remember here on Good Friday is not just the suffering of one man, nearly two millennia ago, but the way in which his suffering symbolizes the agony of the world.

(Slide – Plague Christ) In the middle ages, the German painter Matthias Grunewald depicted the crucified Jesus with the marks of plague.

(Slide – White Crucifixion) As Fascist persecution of Jews escalated in pre-war Europe, Marc Chagall painted his White Crucifixion portraying Jesus wearing a Jewish prayer shawl and head covering surrounded by images of Jewish persecution.



of
and

- White Crucifixion,



(slide) In modern Brazil, the sculptor Guido Rocha depicted the agony of political prisoners being tortured with a piece called The Tortured Christ.

(slide) And the Texan artist James Janknegt portrays the emptiness of modern consumerism in a painting called Crucifixion at Barton's Creek Mall.

Jesus on the cross is a powerful symbol of the agony of the world: the suffering of women in restrictive cultures, the suffering of children forced to become child soldiers, child prostitutes or child laborers, the suffering of men working in appalling conditions; the suffering of animals raised in inhumane conditions. The Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson relates the passion of Christ to ecological challenges, saying, "It is as though the planet were undergoing its agony in the garden, and we, the disciples of Jesus, are curled up fast asleep."¹



Figure 4 - Crucifixion at Barton's Creek Mall, James Janknegt

But is the crucifixion more than just a great symbol of the suffering and agony of the world? Yes, most definitely! In fact it is this "more" that makes it a great symbol. It is a great symbol because of the Christian conviction that it is not just another victim hanging on the cross, but the Son of God. Because Jesus was the incarnation of the transcendent God, his suffering makes the agony of the world a sacred question, a cosmic issue, something worth grieving over, paying attention to, challenging and remedying. The crucifixion of Jesus transforms the agony of the world into a challenge. When we witness suffering of any form, we are confronted with a choice, the choice between callousness and compassion, between apathy and empathy.

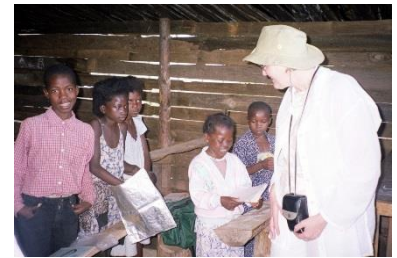
Apathy and callousness are, however, very common responses to suffering. So is the temptation to blame the victim. In the Anglican liturgy for Good Friday, there is a question, a question posed by God to his people: "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow..." Is it nothing to you who pass by? Perhaps you have asked that question too, after your loved

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, "At Our Mercy: The Tree of Life Now Depends on One Twig," *Commonweal*, February 7, 2014, 13.

one died and after a few days of being attentive your friends have gone back to their own lives and grown impatient for you to get over your grief. Perhaps you have asked that question too, when you have been struggling and your family, or your church or your neighbours have barely acknowledged your struggle. Is it nothing to you who pass by? It is a fair question, because often it is nothing to most people. We cannot give each instance of suffering the full attention it deserves, or it would consume us, we fear. And so we pass by, we pretend it is nothing.

Several years ago, I visited a slum in Zambia, in Africa. I passed by many street children in that slum, children literally orphaned by the triple plague of TB, AIDS and malaria, or effectively orphaned by the universal plagues of alcoholism and neglect. I found myself overwhelmed by how many of them there were. I tried to ignore their pleas for a little money or a little attention, fearful that if I gave one a little, I would not be able to cope with all those who wanted the same. But

fortunately, not everyone walks by. We visited a mission for those street children. The mission provided schooling, a daily meal and programs for several hundred children. They had a dormitory for only thirty children, but each child had a bunk and a mosquito net, and two hooks on which to hang their meagre

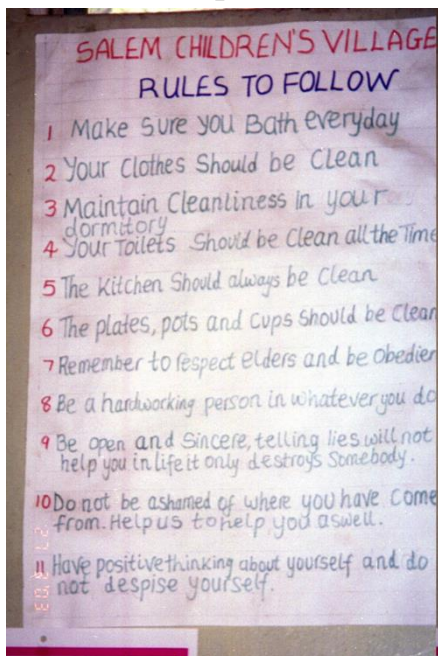


belongings. I noticed a list of rules.

(Slide) A lot of the list is about keeping clean, and then moves on to respecting elders and working hard, but it closes with two that I found quite moving: “Do not be ashamed of where you have come from.” And “Have positive thinking about yourself and do not despise yourself.”

Do not be ashamed. Do not despise yourself. Easier said than done, I suspect, for kids who have lived on the streets, without a home or a family or anyone who cares, one of dozens or hundreds trying to scratch a living from begging or stealing or finding odd jobs. Reading this set of rules, I found myself wondering what it would be like to live

everyday being passed by, being ignored, being seen as a threat and driven away with curses and blows, learning to despise yourself because everyone else despises



you and doesn't know what to do with you. I found myself wondering what it must be like to live with a constant sense of shame, because you don't have a home or a family. And I found myself wondering how an artist would portray that experience, because Christ is in fact being crucified every day in the lives of the thousands of children who are orphaned and abandoned on the streets of Zambia and a hundred other impoverished countries just like it.

In the cross of Christ, we encounter the astonishing conviction that there is one who does not pass by, but who enters into every instance of suffering with full attention, who suffers with us, as one of us, and in so doing transforms the agony of the world. The one who died without sin evokes the innocent suffering of the generations. To place a cross in our sanctuary or to wear it on a chain around your neck is to protest that suffering, to claim that it matters, that it should not be ignored, that it cannot be trivialized because when one suffers today, the Son of God is crucified again. Let us pray:

Closing Prayer

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Gracious God of grief and of suffering,
this Friday seems 'good' for all the wrong reasons.
Be with us in these hours
as we gather in the shadow of the cross of Christ
and hear again the story of death and the sounds of burial.
This is not where we would choose to be, O God,
brought face to face with this symbol of death
and instrument of torture.
Forgive us, where we have sought to avoid such times:
where we have ignored the cross or denied our own pain,
or turned our backs on the sufferings of others.
Strengthen us to be here today,
that we may know that you are here with us.
You know the ways of the world, O God:
you have been there; you are here;
you have loved and cried and lived and died
to be with us, to comfort us, to forgive us and to free us.
For this we give thanks. This we call 'good.'
Amen.