

Which Side are We On?

Summer Saints Sermon Series: Albert Camus (June 14, 2020)

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. (Luke 13:10-17, NRSV)

Today we begin our annual "Summer Saints" sermon series, running from today until July 26. If you have been around Friendship for a while, you may remember us observing it over the last two summers. It's a practice that this preacher inherited from one of his dearest mentors, and I'm excited about carrying it forward.

On each Sunday in a Summer Saints series, we take up a notable life and listen deeply for what that life has to teach us about the walk of faith. These "saints" are often Christians, *though not always*. God can speak to us in many ways and through many different sorts of people. All of our Summer Saints have something to teach us if we're willing to listen.

The "saint" for this Sunday is certainly an out-of-the-box pick: Albert Camus, the 20th century French philosopher, author, and journalist. He is perhaps best known for his 1947 novel *The Plague* (In French: *La Peste*), which was an important part of him being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957 – being the 2nd youngest person ever to be accorded this honor.

Camus was born into a French family in Algeria in 1913. His father Lucien, an agricultural worker, died in one of the early battles of the First World War, and so Camus never knew him. He grew up in a poor neighborhood in Algiers, and this background had a significant effect on his later life and outlook.

Starting as a student and then more so as a young adult, Camus became very politically active, all the while sharpening his deep belief in human dignity and the necessity of

justice, and rejecting a politics (of either the left or right) that would elevate *efficiency* above both.

By 1938, the rise of fascist regimes in Germany, Italy, and Spain had come to trouble him greatly, and he had developed strong feelings against authoritative colonialism as he witnessed the harsh treatment of the Arabs and Berbers by French authorities. During the war which followed, he took an active role in the underground French Resistance as a journalist and editor of a banned newspaper, using a pseudonym for his articles and fake ID cards to avoid being captured.

By the time the war was over in 1945, Camus was a celebrated writer known for his role in the Resistance. He gave lectures at various universities in the United States and Latin America during two separate trips, and soon completed a second cycle of his work, including the aforementioned novel *The Plague*, among many other essays and philosophical pieces. Receiving the news that he was to be awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize for Literature came as a personal shock to *him*, though to few others.

He died in January 1960 at the far-too-young age of 46 in a car accident. There has been some speculation that the accident was *not* an accident – that he was actually assassinated by the KGB for his vocal criticism of Soviet Communist abuses. At his funeral, his famous friend Jean-Paul Sartre (with whom he had earlier had a falling out) gave a eulogy, paying tribute to Camus' "heroic, stubborn humanism."

Camus has been described as the theologians' favorite atheist. Though not a believer, his deep compassion and activism for suffering humanity, and his pleas for the weak and vulnerable, have drawn many to see him as a kind of "secular saint" – one who, without the basis of religious convictions, thoroughly identified with the hurting and denounced the cruelty and oppression of so much human power.

For the past several weeks I have been meditating on a quote of his that sums up his deeply human philosophy: "All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences."

For most of this time, I considered this quote in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, asking myself what I could do to be on the side of the victims, to not join forces with the pestilence. In the last two weeks, however, I have been hearing the quote in a new context, in the midst of a different kind of pestilence.

Of course, the pestilence of racism (and indifference to it) is not new. But none of us can ignore the grief and anger rising to the surface and overflowing onto our streets, the cries for justice in the face of generations of systemic *injustice*. The question posed by Camus seems even more urgent: What can we do to be on the side of the victims, and to not join forces with the pestilences?

The answer to this question is not as simple as we might imagine it to be. This is where Camus' lack of religious belief, coupled with his deep compassion and commitment to justice, give him an important perspective that we "decent Christian people" need to hear. He can see things to which we may be blind ... the ways in which even sincere, well-intentioned faith can have us – however unwittingly – joining forces with the pestilences. Camus had no personal hostility to Christianity as such, but he could ask of many believers, in his own day and now – Which side are you really on?

In our gospel text for this morning we see an example of just such a conflict. From the first, we are told that it's the Sabbath, and that Jesus is teaching in one of the synagogues. And, "just then," a woman enters – a woman who has been crippled for *eighteen years* ... bent over and unable to stand up straight. She is not presented as a special model of faith or virtue; just a woman who was crippled and had been for a very long time.

She walks in, and immediately Jesus sees her, and with no words of preparation or , explanation, he calls her over, rather matter-of-factly tells her that she is now free from her crippling condition, and then lays his hands on her, enabling her, immediately, to stand up straight and praise God for her new freedom!

A time to rejoice! Or not? You might think that this would be something to celebrate, but apparently not so. It's *now* the official spokesman for established religion who gets all *bent out of shape*! He's upset – not that a woman would get healed – but that she had the impertinence to get healed *on the Sabbath*! And so, he shouts to the crowd: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day."

Now in interpreting this story, it's important that we not jump on this man too quickly. His reverence for the Law – its command to observe the Sabbath – is in itself something we can respect. It is a commandment which was and is central to Jewish identity and practice, rooted so deeply as it is in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But as we know, there is also a danger. The fourth commandment commands that the people not "work" on the Sabbath day. But then, what exactly constitutes "work"? And so, in a deeply sincere desire to not violate the commandment, devoutly religious scholars over time developed dozens of rules and regulations which were effectively amendments to the fourth commandment – all in an effort to define work *very precisely* and to help people avoid even a *hint* of performing any "work" on that day.

You know where this leads. In time, what is supposed to be a day wholly dedicated to rejoicing in God becomes a *frightening* day in which people worry the whole day long they might screw up and perform a deed of "work" after all. And so, something that is meant to set people free, only serves to overpower them with burdens too heavy to

bear ... something which is meant to *enhance* life, is transformed into something that *crushes* it.

The woman enters the synagogue, and Jesus *sees* her ... he sees *her* ... he sees a woman who has suffered for far too long, and he wants to set her free. But as for the “religious leader” in the place, the official spokesman for the faith? He sees only a Law that may have been broken.

Now understand: Law is important and necessary for human life, but when our reverence for it outweighs our reverence for the lives it is meant to order and guide, then we’ve lost the plot. And in this way, sides are taken, and Jesus *always* chooses the side of the victims ... but somehow, Religion – even when in Jesus’ name – all too often chooses the side of the pestilence.

We can lay eyes upon a desperate family, with children, from Central America and see suffering human beings trying to escape unthinkable conditions, and ask, “What might we be able to do to help?” Or we can lay eyes upon the *same* family and see nothing but human refuse, criminals, and ask, “But are you here *legally*?”

We can witness a restrained man on the ground, with a knee pressing down on his neck, and feel the horror of a murder taking place in front of our eyes, and ask, “How long must this race-linked brutality go on?” Or we can witness the *same* man and see nothing but a low-life thug, and tell ourselves, “I’m sure he’s just getting what’s coming to him.”

One way is standing on the side of the victims, the other is joining forces with the pestilences. Which side do you think Jesus is on? Which side are *we* on?

But it’s not always as blatant as this. To go back to the gospel text, despite the religious leader’s doubling down on the Law, we could, ourselves, be more generous in our seeing of *him*. Perhaps he is not as unfeeling as we might first imagine. His raising his voice against Jesus’ apparent legal carelessness notwithstanding, there’s no reason to think that he had any ill will towards the woman. If anything, in a small Jewish community with a synagogue at its heart, it’s reasonable to suppose that the leader *knew* the woman. And if this is a fair read, and I think it is, we can easily see him *caring* for this woman, as a member of his community. We can easily see him feeling truly sorry for her condition.

There are many of us white Christians who have had our eyes opened to some extent over the last few weeks. For many of us, some cluelessness has been replaced by the burden of knowledge, and many may see hurting people – black brothers and sisters – and find that they *care* for them, that they *feel* for them, in a way deeper than before.

No one should deny that this is a positive step. And with a generous reading, this is where the synagogue leader is. He may feel genuine pity for the woman who has been

oppressed in body for so long, but that's as far as it goes. His intentions may be good, but he feels powerless to go further.

But Jesus knows that this woman needs more, much more, than pity – she needs *healing*. And as with so many others in the gospels, the healing that Jesus offers is about so much more than repairing a physical body. It's also about restoration ... about the restoration of dignity, of worth ... of one's God-given birthright. Jesus knows her, not as the poor, crippled woman to feel sorry for, but as a *daughter of Abraham*, being restored to her rightful place of honor and reverence among her people.

And this, my friends, is what the prophets call *Justice*. In the way of that holy ruffian Amos, justice is about so much more than external obedience to law or the punishment of lawbreakers, but goes to restoring the rightful place of those disenfranchised ... restoring the birthright of the disaffected, the marginalized, and the broken. It speaks to right relationships – and societal structures to support them – which reflect not human arrogance, bigotry, or greed, but the deep and wide universal compassion of God.

There are some out there who are sure that the answer today is simply to allow Jesus into our hearts to forgive us and make us into more loving people, and that when this happens, our race problems will disappear. Well, as a preacher, I can say that it *is* true that we need Jesus! But we need more than his love in our hearts, opening our eyes to the pain of others. That's only *half* the battle ... it's an essential start, but we also need to follow him in his work of *healing*. We need the *Justice* of the gospel, for as Cornel West has said, Justice is what Love looks like in *public*. Anything less fails the victims of the world we've made.

The gospel – preached without its Justice – may have been enough to guide my white ancestors to treat black neighbors kindly, but it wasn't enough to make them stand against slavery, or Jim Crow – those structures which enforced the social superiority of some and the inferiority of others.

And a gospel, preached without its Justice, is not enough now to take the steps that we must take: To take a hard look at our lives, and the world, and the sinful systems and structures in which we are complicit, and work to dismantle the deeply ingrained injustice which persists. These steps require the glad embrace of a *whole* gospel – a gospel of Love *and* Justice – the gospel Jesus taught and lived ... the gospel he offers us even now.

May we heed his call today, and so take our place on the side of the victims, and not join forces with the pestilences.

To the glory of God. Amen.