

ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. John F. Wirenius, *Deacon*

A Crack in Everything

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, November 20, 2016
The Last Sunday of the Year—Based on Luke 23:33-43

We live in a broken world.

Maybe it always has been broken.

You can read it in history books. You can see it live on the news.

And you just heard it in today's Gospel reading.

God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to save it, and the world promptly crucified Him.

Our world.

My least favorite liturgy of the year is the Passion drama, where all of us are meant to scream out "crucify him," as the crowd. I cringe every year as I join in the cry.

Because we all want to believe that we wouldn't be part of that crowd, that we wouldn't have chosen the violent man of blood over the Prince of Peace, that we are the heroes of the story.

If only.

I have a terrible suspicion that who we are, that who I am, anyway, is Judas Iscariot, the betrayer. Because all too often I have chosen to deny love to my fellow men and women, to pull away from the person who isn't comfortable to be around, who looks different, who acts different, whose pain is too evident. So we walk by, with at least enough decency to feel a tug of shame.

That's not the worst of it, though. Because it's not just strangers. When we let down the people we genuinely love, in displaced anger or fatigue, and push them a little bit away from us, or make them the butt of what passes for affectionate teasing, but carries with it a real bite of malice, we betray those whom we love, in a smaller way than Judas betrayed Jesus, but in a very real way nonetheless.

Oscar Wilde wrote that each man kills the thing he loves, and it doesn't take much to do it. We do it with a bitter look, a flattering word, a kiss. Some love too little, some too long.

In other words, our little betrayals, our minor unkindnesses, are a part of the broken world we live in.

We are partakers in and makers of the brokenness.

That means we are not the heroes of the story. We own the wreckage.

So we are the soldiers who crucify Jesus and we are the people who mock him. We can't just offload all that guilt onto the people who are not-us, however you define not-us.

That lets us off the hook too easily.

We have met the enemy, and he is us. And she is us, too.

And so we look around and see a country, a world, even, riven with hostility and suspicion, a mess too big, it seems, to be cleaned up.

The day after Election Day, we heard that the great poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen had died. In one of his greatest songs, "Anthem," he wrote that

We asked for signs
the signs were sent:
the birth betrayed
the marriage spent
the widowhood
of every government —
signs for all to see.

But those signs aren't signs of hopelessness, of abandonment. Leonard Cohen didn't think that the brokenness of the world was irredeemable. Just a few lines later, he admits that there's a crack, a crack in everything. But then he tells us: That's how the light gets in.

For the past few weeks, I've been leading a book study on the Starbridge novels of Susan Howatch. And one of the main reasons why those six novels speak to me, some 20 years after the last one was published, is because Howatch asks the question of how can all the suffering, the mistakes, the messy lives, be allowed by God. The question isn't answered by any one of Howatch's earnest clergymen. No, it's the atheist sculptor Harriet March who comes closest to the mystery in describing her own work:

*"Every step I take, every bit of clay I ever touch, they are all there in the final work. If they hadn't happened, then this" - she gestured to the sculpture - "wouldn't exist. In fact they **had** to happen for the work to emerge as it is. So in the end every major disaster, every tiny error, every wrong turning, every fragment of discarded clay, all the blood, sweat and tears, everything has meaning. I give it meaning. I re-use, reshape, recast all that goes wrong so that, in the end, nothing is wasted and nothing is without significance and nothing ceases to be precious to me."*

Later in the novel, Howatch comes to grips with St. Paul's seemingly smug line "and we know that all things work together for good to them that love God." How can that be, she asks, and here is her answer, very much in sync with Cohen's, almost like an expansion of his:

The verse would be better translated "All things *intermingle* for good to them that love God." This would mean that the good and bad were intermingling to create a synergy—or, in other words: in the process of intermingling, the good and the bad formed something else. The bad didn't become less bad, and the dark didn't become less dark—one had to acknowledge this,

acknowledge the reality of the suffering. But the light emanating from a loving God created a pattern on the darkness, and in that pattern was the meaning, and in the meaning lay the energy which would generate the will to survive.

Which leads us to the brokenness of life. It's painful, it's divisive, it's frightening. It can be lethal, even.

But here's the thing—the brokenness of the world, the destruction that it brings into our lives—can call us to a more full life. It can present an opportunity to see our own share in the state of things we deplore, and stop us from only deploring others.

All those hurts we inflict, and that we suffer I was describing earlier? We don't know where they lead after the moment they're inflicted. "Famous Blue Raincoat," another Cohen song, tells a tale of a man betrayed by an affair between the woman he loves and a friend he thinks of as a brother.

After describing the betrayal in the body of a letter that is only friendly on the surface, the writer pauses and asks what he really has to say. He stumbles at first: "I guess that I miss you, I guess I forgive you. I'm glad that you stood in my way." And then he realizes the reason for the impulse to write, why expressing that forgiveness was so critical. He finally says "Thanks for the trouble you took from her eyes/I thought it was there for good, so I never tried."

It's not about pushing past our own pain and putting it aside, it's about using what we feel, how we feel, to open our hearts to others we might not have seen in their full humanity before. And to empathize with them through the shared experience of being human.

Because being human means being terribly vulnerable to the tragedies and upheavals of life. It means fear, and betrayal, yes, but loyalty, love and devotion too.

Just as we are part of the problem, just as we bear our scars that may make it hard for us to open up to those we fear may turn on us, so too we can surprise by a sudden flash of a smile, an unexpected moment of trust.

We're not just our flaws. We're not just our failures of courage or of love. And we can learn from those failures, and give meaning to them by not falling into the same patterns that lead to distrust. Our very failures can fuel our becoming our best selves.

Forget your perfect offering,

There's a crack in everything. It's how the light gets in.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

©2016 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022