

# Hello, Brother!

March 24, 2019

Today's Gospel is one of extremes. It couldn't be any more obtuse nor could it be any more relevant. I suspect that unless you have really spent some time poring over this passage, its meaning probably evades you. I'll be honest, each time I read it I have to go over it like a syllogism in logic class, or a poorly phrased word problem: "If this doesn't equal that, then what?"

So let's really dive into the text. It's on page 76 in the New Testament in your pew Bibles. Verse 1 one begins, "At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." It's helpful here to clarify our pronouns. "Him" in this verse equals Jesus, and "their" equals the Jewish. So, people were telling Jesus that Pilate had mixed some Galileans blood into the Jewish sacrifices in the temple. This is one of those places where we see just how vicious, how despotic, how psychopathic Pilate really was. He mixes some Galileans blood into the temple sacrifices. There is no actual mention of this happening in history, but the sheer cruelty, the sheer antisocial nature of Pilate's action is undeniable. The temple sacrifice is a Jewish religious action of ritual purity. So to tamper with it at all is inexcusable. But to mix in human blood is truly, truly abominable.

But this isn't where Jesus' questioners focus. No, his questioners ask whether the Galileans whose blood was mixed with the temple sacrifice were worse sinners than the rest of the Galileans. Now, remember, I told you that this is like a logical syllogism. It's a complex word problem. What dynamic does this remind you of in our present day? Any thoughts? Do we need to break it down a little further? Because these people were victims of this heinously vicious act, are they any worse sinners than the rest of us? Are they to blame for the vicious act against them?

Okay, now I start to see some light bulbs go on in your heads. What's this like today? It's like blaming LGBTQIA inclusion for 9-11. It's like saying that mass shootings are because we've banned God from school. (By the way, as a total aside: the God that I believe in cannot be banned from anywhere; she's much more wiley than that.) Is this starting to make sense now? Jesus' next example follows the same logic: "Were the people who were killed when a tower fell on them any worse sinners than others?" Do you think THAT is why they died? Because they were worse sinners? To both questions, Jesus answers no. No. They weren't worst sinners. They weren't being punished for their sins. No, this isn't how God works.

Every time that I accidentally see the 700 Club, I want to scream this passage back at them through the TV. It's a tactic that I know will work just as well as talking with the folks on that show. They weren't being punished. God doesn't work that way. But Jesus' answer goes even further. He says, "No, but unless you repent, you will perish as they did." They weren't worse sinners. The tragedies that befell them were not their fault. But unless YOU repent, you will perish as they did. Unless we change our world, all of this is going to keep on happening.

As I've been praying and researching this past week, one person kept coming up in my prayers: Mohammed Daoud Nabi was the 71-year-old greeter at one of the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand which was the victim of a terror attack last weekend. As the gunman entered the mosque, Mr. Nabi reached out in welcome, "Hello, brother!" He reached out to welcome a stranger. That was his default, and he was shot three times. Our scripture asks us today, "Do

you think that he was a greater sinner than any of us?” And Jesus’ response is, “No, but if you do not repent, your fate will be the same.”

Friends, I am as sick of terrorism sermons and white supremacy sermons and LGBTQIA exclusion sermons and gun violence sermons and refugee sermons as you are. I’d much rather be spending a month talking about prayer practices or trusting God. But as Jesus points out in his response today, the world isn’t going to change unless we change it. Metanoia, transformative change of heart, the reformation of the world into the reign in which God intends, isn’t going to happen on its own.

You’ve all heard Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King quoted saying “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” I always imagined a visual aid going along with this: an arc, a line that is bending, but on one end of it are all of us hanging on, pulling with all of our might. The moral arc of the universe is going to bend toward justice because we bend it that way.

Saadia Ahmad, a Muslim woman and adjunct professor at Providence College, wrote an article for America Magazine this week. She writes: *“There are practical things non-Muslim allies can do as a response to this particular act of terrorism and that all of us can do at all times to prevent future violence—and to protect not only Muslims but also people of color, immigrants, Jews, the L.G.B.T. community and all groups that are dehumanized and persecuted in ways large and small.”*

First, reach out to any Muslims that you do know and ask how they’re doing. Just as the terror attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue affected Jews the world over and the Pulse nightclub attack wracked LGBTQIA people across the globe, so, too, this attack. A simple, “How are you?” is a welcome comfort.

Doctor Ahmad’s next step is to call out those who do dehumanize, stereotype, or mistreat Muslims or any marginalized group. She recalls, *“Last fall, I called out a political candidate who referred to Muslims and Middle Eastern people as ‘savages’ not by yelling at him but by calmly asking why he used that word and explaining why it is dangerous—and deadly. He heard me and vowed to not repeat his mistake.”* We’ve heard this before, and yet how many of us are silent across the Thanksgiving table? How often do we allow dehumanizing Facebook posts to go unchecked? Friends, now is the time and you are the person.

Third, Dr. Ahmad says that it’s important for white Christians to call out and name terrorism perpetrated by white Christians just as fervently as all Muslims are expected to denounce all terrorism perpetrated by fringe Muslims. She names several more tactics that are interesting and important strategies, but the last piece that I’ll lift up, the piece that I think is both most in keeping with Jesus and our Lenten project of moving from death to life is to commit oneself and one’s society to a Positive Peace. Rather than an absence of violence, Positive Peace is focused on developing the conditions that contribute to a peaceful society rather than simply focusing on the causes of war. According to John Hewko, the General Secretary of Rotary International, the idea of a Positive Peace is to “reframe the question. Instead of examining the causes of war, we can explore the attitudes, institutions, and structures that build a more peaceful society and work to create those conditions in vulnerable areas even before conflict occurs.” And while reducing poverty and providing clean drinking water are critical components to a Positive Peace, most of the work for peace doesn’t happen at conferences or in diplomatic circles. It happens through

personal relationships, relationships that are developed over time and across borders, and through disparate cultures.

And so my final challenge to you today is to commit yourself to broadening your cultural area of influence. Next time you find yourself needing a new doctor, or insurance agent, or realtor, commit yourself to finding someone who doesn't look like you, finding someone whose culture is different than yours. Commit yourself to creating sustained relationships with people who are different than you. It may seem small, but it's through relationships, through truly being people to one another that the kingdom will come. It is then that we will be able to see God's priorities, and values, and ways of being manifesting themselves in the world. It's in saying to someone who is very different from ourselves, "Hello, brother," that we will be a part of ending the cycle of hate. May it be so.

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**Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9**  
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