

When Our Best Isn't Very Good

David A. Baer

*Second Sunday in Lent (C)
March 17, 2019*

Text: Luke 13:31-35

Like you I've been heartbroken and dismayed over the news from Christchurch, New Zealand this Friday. After posting a white supremacist manifesto, a gunman attacked Muslim communities in that city as they gathered for Friday prayers. When we gather here on Sunday morning, I think of this as a place of safety and refuge, a place to be close to God, and I imagine our Muslim neighbors here and across the world feel the same way. But instead of sanctuary in Friday prayers, there was terror and violence. We can join our hearts and prayers with those grieving, and we will. People in New Zealand are already beginning to have conversations about reforming their gun laws—this is something our own nation has had to reckon with, but it's a discussion particular to every country, and it's something New Zealanders need to work out for themselves. What transcends national borders, though, is the resurgence of hateful ideas about certain spaces being reserved for white people, and the use of violence to terrorize and exclude others. We've seen it in our country and elsewhere, and the gunman in this case pointed to other white supremacist terrorists in the USA and Norway as inspiration for his attack. Racist violence doesn't emerge out of nowhere—it's aided and abetted when people demonize and exclude minority groups, and by those of us who stand by and let it happen.

Every person—male or female; black, brown, or white; Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or atheist—bears the sacred image of God. That's from the very beginning of the biblical story. People of all tribes, nations, and languages will gather for the victory feast of God at the end of time—that's from the end of the story. The love of God in Jesus Christ crucified is for all people everywhere—that's the middle. Beginning, middle, and end, we Christians live by a story that makes all people our neighbors, and that requires us to treat them as graciously and generously as God has treated us. White supremacy is the opposite of the good news of Jesus Christ. There is no place for it in the world God is creating. So I expect each of us, when we hear racist jokes, when we see someone being put down or excluded, when we see folks in our workplaces or communities marginalized or ignored because of what they look like or where they come from—I expect that we will not only pray for those who were victimized in Christchurch, but that we will take affirmative steps to extinguish the fires of hatred with the love of God, so that nobody has to fear or grieve like this again.

I had intended to begin my message this morning on a more light-hearted note, and I'm going to get there in a moment. I think it's necessary to be able to look at ourselves and our frailty with a sense of humor, so that we don't invest our brokenness with too much power. But it's also appropriate to remember that evil has a real presence in this world, and that we can't let up in pushing back, not with hostility and violence, but with love, particularly by being in solidarity with those who are under threat.

Sometimes our best isn't very good. I'm not a big fan of those contest shows on

TV—those competitions for dancers or singers, talent shows, baking shows, and so on. At this point they just seem so formulaic, so rote that I have a hard time getting into them. But do you want to know a secret? I'm not proud of it, but if I ever do watch *American Idol*, the pop-star TV contest that's been running since 2002, it's for the auditions. The greater part of each season is taken up in head-to-head competition, but the really entertaining part of the show is the beginning of each season, when the judges take to the road to hear auditions of thousands of would-be contestants. Some of these know they don't have what it takes, but they know how the game is played: if you are a colorful enough character, you can get on TV. If you bomb in an entertaining way, you can parlay your brief TV appearance into a viral internet video, and after that who knows? Engineering student William Hung famously launched a 7-year career in music and acting with his lackluster audition for *American Idol* in 2004.

The real heart-breakers, though, are the folks who sing probably as well as most of us do—a little too nasal, a bit off key here and there—but whose families and friends have convinced them that they are the stuff stars are made of. Some of them are truly dreadful, singing in a monotone or with ridiculous elocution. But here they are, thinking this is it, I have a shot at this, I could really be the next big pop star. They bare their souls, they bring what they think is their best stuff and put it out there to be judged, and they fall flat on their faces.

Sometimes what you think is your best stuff isn't very good at all. An old pastor of mine told me about the time he was working as a hospital chaplain intern. He felt he had everything he needed to bring the love of Christ into the hospital room—he knew his Bible, he knew how to pray, he knew how to listen. And so brimming with confidence, he opened the door to visit his first patient, who was in traction. He said, "How are you doing today?" The reply: "How does it *look* like I'm doing?" The visit went downhill from there. This minister's best stuff wasn't very good.

For Jesus and the rest of the Jewish people in the first century, Jerusalem was supposed to be the best stuff. It was the capital city of Judea, conquered by King David himself. In the years leading up to Jesus' birth, King Herod the Great (the father of the Herod from today's scripture, who is known as Herod Antipas) undertook a number of building projects, including the restoration of the Temple. This city was the political and religious center of Jewish life, and faithful Jews from across the world would make pilgrimages to it. You would expect that its inhabitants would be good and decent persons, and that its leaders would be wise and discerning. Ask any one of Jesus' followers, and they would tell you that this magnificent city was the best their people had to offer.

But in today's scripture, Jesus reminds some Pharisees that there is a dark flip-side to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is not good. But through Jesus it will be the place where God's transforming love touches down and begins to spread. We get the most out of this story, I believe, if we read it not as a story about those other people, the ones who live in Jerusalem, but about us. What is your best stuff, your proudest accomplishment, your greatest strength? How is it undercut and compromised by the universal brokenness that runs through every facet of human life? Humbled by seeing the whole picture, can you offer your own Jerusalem to God, not as a self-improvement project for God's approval, but as a landing pad for God's grace? These are the questions I'd invite you to wrestle with this morning as we enter Jesus' story...

Some Pharisees come to Jesus. They come to warn him that Herod wants to kill him, and if he knows what's good for him he'd better skedaddle out of Herod's territory. Now, they may be doing this out of the goodness of their heart. They may be working for Herod, who is fresh from executing another prophet, John the Baptist, and

who wants to see if it will be enough simply to scare Jesus away. Or they may be freelancing, jealous of Jesus' appeal and eager to stop the flow of their own flocks to Jesus' movement. But whatever their motives, Jesus isn't having any of it. You go back and tell that fox,¹ he says, that I'm going to do the healing work I came here to do. And then I'll be on my way, Jesus says, not because I'm afraid of Herod, but because Jerusalem, not Galilee, is where prophets are killed.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" Jerusalem has God's Temple. It is the place where God's chosen line of kings ruled God's people. But it is also the place where God's messengers are ignored, marginalized, and executed. The leaders of Jerusalem threw the prophet Jeremiah down a well, because he kept telling them the truth that God intended for their city to fall to the Babylonians. There is much for Jerusalem to be proud of, but there is also, especially among its leaders, arrogance and an unwillingness to listen to God's voice, even when it's for their own good. As Jesus says: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Jerusalem is supposed to be the best stuff God's people have to offer, but, looking at the whole story, it is not very good at all. But it is also Jesus' destination, and the place where he will show his great love, the place of new life and resurrection, and the birthplace of the church. "And I tell you," Jesus says, "you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" ... pointing forward to Palm Sunday and everything in the week that follows.

Jerusalem thinks it is good. It is not good. It is, as Jesus' story shows, a place governed by those willing to use violence and suppress the truth to maintain their power. But Jesus isn't scared of Herod, and he isn't scared to put himself in the most dangerous place imaginable for a prophet to be. Jesus goes to Jerusalem precisely *because* it is not good. He goes there not just to be killed, but to bless Jerusalem, to bless the brokenness that calls itself good with his words from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

Some of you know about my other role serving the larger church: I'm the stated clerk for Southern New England Presbytery. And in that role I get to be their parliamentarian. So I get called on all the time during their meetings to explain parliamentary procedure, and help keep things on track. This is a comfortable role for me, working with systems and rules—it feeds the same analytical part of me that enjoyed doing mathematical proofs when I was in school. But in talking with some folks recently, I've also come to see their weakness. Our rules prioritize action—making a decision—over bringing everybody along, and they don't force us to reach out to those who might be hurt or disappointed by something the church has done. If a vote goes 99-1, we think that's a great success. But Jesus tells a story about a good shepherd who can't rest or celebrate until the one lost sheep out of a hundred is found and becomes part of the flock again. What's more, our rules for running meetings are very familiar to people who use them all the time in business or government settings—in other words, people who are already powerful. If we're not careful, this allows those who hold power in the secular world to run the show in the church too. But Jesus gathered a rabble of lepers, beggars, prostitutes, and sinners, and told the religious authorities that they were going into the kingdom of heaven first.

Now that doesn't mean Presbyterian rules are bad, or that we can't resist their misuse. But it does mean that whatever we point to as our greatest accomplishment, the thing we're most proud of, we're likely to find the seeds of sin and brokenness already

1 Foxes are sly, but not big enough to present a serious danger to humans. Jesus is saying that he recognizes Herod's scheme for what it is, but he doesn't think Herod can make good on his threats.

sown there. Our best isn't as good as we think it is.

Look, I may know enough not to audition for American Idol. But I wonder whether I, whether all of us, don't fall on our faces all the time—maybe not publicly, maybe in front of a national TV audience, but in front of an audience of One, the only audience who really, ultimately matters. Spiritual renewal can become self-righteousness. Attempts to show care and compassion for others can so easily succumb to our need for approval and recognition. Our best stuff so often comes wrapped in hidden agendas and motives that we ourselves don't realize. And that's why Jesus laments over Jerusalem. It is a fitting thing in Lent to examine ourselves, to see that the things we call good may in fact not be so very good as they seem to us. The old Christian mystics called this "dying to sin"—recognizing how far short we fall with even our best stuff.

But remember that Jesus doesn't just lament over Jerusalem. Jesus goes there. He goes there to be rejected and crucified by the best leaders, the best institutions humanity has to offer. But in his story, when our best has done its worst to him, when Jesus' best, most loyal friend deserts him, when the soldiers of the greatest empire on earth strip and humiliate him, when he gives up his spirit and they put him in the tomb, God raises him up. And because of this, we have reason to hope that Jesus is there where we, unknowing, unmindful, fall short with our best stuff. He's there, pleading, blessing, calling down God's forgiveness for us, until we set aside our best stuff, dying to everything we used to call good, and give our own spirits into the hands of the God who raises the dead to new life. Amen.